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MEMORY CORNER

TOM GALLON

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"SEE--I BRING HIM! YESTERDAY, IN THIS ROOM, I TOLD YOU THAT HE
SHOULD COME TO YOU."

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THE CROWN

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(1970), 8, 2

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PUBLICATIONS**



Memory Corner

By
Tom Gallon
AUTHOR OF

“The Rogue’s Heiress,” “Cruise of the Make-Believers,”
“Tinman,” “The Lion,” “Tatterley,” “Meg the
Lady,” “The Great Gay Road,” etc.

“I do but sing because I must,
And pipe but as the linnets sing.”
(“In Memoriam”)



L. C.

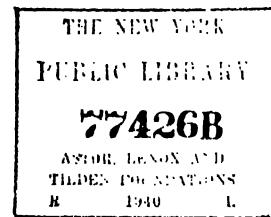
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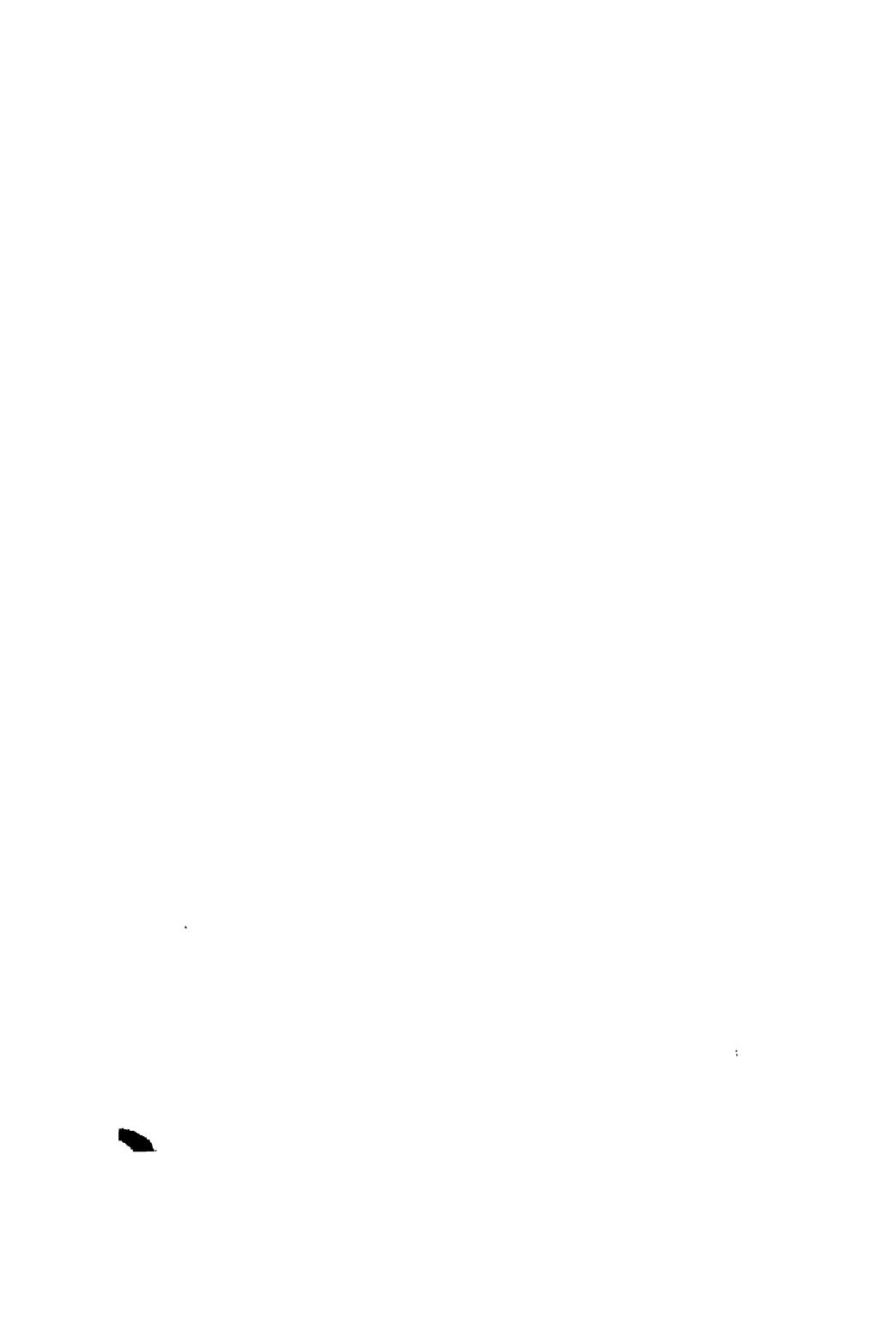
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Memory Corner

CHAPTER I

DREAMS IN THE DUSK

There are seven houses in Little Place, Hampstead—and no more than that. Each house is high and narrow, and each shoulders its fellow closely, with no space between. Each house has a green door (for everybody knows everybody else, and imitation becomes a form of flattery), and each house is approached by two wide, shallow steps leading from the pavement. Also, as it is a friendly Place, the green doors adjoin each other, which is convenient when one is going in or out, and happens to meet a neighbor, and so can chat for a moment before stepping out into the ordinary street.

For the purposes of this history we are only at present concerned with three of the houses. We will pass over numbers one and two, and will come first of all to number three. In the dusk of this particular autumn evening a young girl was seated at the piano in the little drawing-room, and was softly singing.

Facing the row of houses was a high wall, which formed the other side of Little Place, and in front of this wall were some great trees—a line of them. The

end of Little Place was close by another wall; so that now you can see the compactness of it all, and can understand, perhaps, why the inhabitants of it rather prided themselves on being shut away from the world as it were.

It was raining—a gentle, melancholy drizzle, and from the trees the leaves were falling; the girl, turning her head as she finished the song, glanced out through the uncovered window, and saw that prospect, just as she remembered to have seen it through some fifteen years. If, at the remembrance of all that time, she gave a little sigh, it was not exactly of discontent or of unhappiness, but rather that vaguely in her mind was another world, right outside Little Place, Hampstead, where things were happening; and in Little Place, Hampstead, nothing ever happened at all.

Sitting slimly and primly upright, with her fair head a little raised—the song finished—and her fingers still lightly resting on the keys, Stella thought about it all. She thought of those years during which she had grown up in that house, and of all that had happened in that quiet back-water of life.

This was the house of the little ladies; for in that fashion everyone that knew them spoke of the Misses Teakle. Goodness only knows how long they had lived at No. 3, because Stella firmly believed that they had never lived anywhere else. At all events they used to point to articles of furniture that had belonged to “Father” and “Mother,” and which seemed never to have been moved, at all events not within Stella’s recollection.

They had a curious fashion of going about together.



Miss Dorcas Teakle never entered a room unless Miss Betsy Teakle was by her side; but for the fact that the staircase was narrow they would probably have gone upstairs side by side. There could not have been any very great difference in their ages, and in the fifteen years since Stella had first come into their lives they had not changed in the least. Absurd as it sounds, it might almost be said that they wore the same dresses as at the time when Stella had first seen them.

Miss Dorcas, as being slightly the elder, and therefore the more staid, wore black, and parted her gray hair smoothly in the middle, and did it neatly behind; Miss Betsy wore gray, and affected a more becoming style of dressing her hair, which was also gray, and set a comb in it. They had that rather nervous look which comes to women who have lived alone together for a number of years; it may best be described as a pretty, timid shrinking from contact with the world. They spoke always softly and a little mincingly.

Properly speaking Stella should not have come into their lives at all, and her advent fifteen years before had scared them not a little. It had staggered Little Place, and had been a subject for conversation and explanation for quite a long time.

We do not need to go further back in the history of the little ladies than from the point of Stella's arrival. They had lived their placid lives, attended by a maid almost as old as themselves—Priscilla; the maid had descended to them, as it were, with the house and furniture. Their little modest fortune sufficed for all their wants, and there was a little put by, and carefully invested. And then one day a

stranger pulled the brightly-polished knob of the door-bell and handed in his card. Being shown into the drawing-room, where everything was also brightly polished, the stranger seated himself, and rested his chin on the top of his walking-cane, and looked about him. When the little ladies, side by side, came nervously into the room, the stranger rose and bowed to them; and they fixed their eyes upon him, and waited, trembling. For his card had announced that he was that most dreadful being to nervous ladies who live out of the world—a solicitor.

It must be said that the stranger was almost as nervous as themselves in explaining his errand; he apologized for it, and was evidently a little non-plussed at the duty before him. He explained that a client of his had died, and that his last request had been that his motherless child—then four years of age—should be given into the care of Miss Teakle.

“My client’s name was Osborne—John Osborne.”

The heart of Miss Betsy Teakle under her gray dress had given a little jump, and then had seemed to stand still. The eyes of Miss Dorcas Teakle, turning slowly, had looked at Miss Betsy for a moment; and the lawyer thought that he read the story.

“John Osborne was—was a friend of ours. Some years ago.”

It was Miss Dorcas who spoke; Miss Betsy said nothing. She caught her breath in a little quick sigh as she looked up at last at the lawyer; and that was all the sign she ever gave. Like so many other things that had happened in her quiet life it was just a thing done with—a memory to be folded away, and only taken out now and then to be looked at in secret.

It was the one tiny scrap of romance that had come into the life of Miss Betsy, and it had not been much of a romance after all. John Osborne had been a friend, and he had suddenly taken to calling; and it had been understood that when he called it was Miss Betsy who was to see him. Heaven only knows what things they had said to each other in the little faded drawing-room; no one but Miss Betsy would ever know what he had promised, if indeed he had ever promised anything at all. He had gone away, and, after a vague letter or two, she had never heard anything of him. And now it seemed that he had married somebody else, and, in the same vague, uncertain fashion in which he had lived, had died, and had left his child to the mercy of the world.

Dying, he must have remembered the woman in the gray dress to whom he had talked in the little faded drawing-room; she at least would be faithful to any trust that might be given her. And that was how it had happened that the lawyer, catching that glance from the eyes of Miss Dorcas, thought he read the story, and by chance happened to read it pretty correctly.

It had never occurred to either of them to refuse. This was what John Osborne had wished, and of course it must be carried out. They told the lawyer quite simply that they would undertake the care of the child, and made arrangements for having it sent to them. And that night they sat up quite late—till almost eleven o'clock, in fact—talking about this wonderful business with fluttering hearts. They were a little frightened, but they were growing already to like the idea of it. In the first place, it would be

such a wonderful thing for Little Place. If such a word could be used in connection with either Miss Dorcas or Miss Betsy, it might be said almost that they chuckled as they pictured the collective gasp that Little Place would give when first the child appeared there. For that was the only blot on Little Place; there was not a girl child in all the length and breadth of it. There was a boy, but he was commonplace, and did not count.

It is most improper to do anything in a hurry or with any degree of excitement in Little Place. If anything happens outside you may not rush to the window and stare out; at the most you get discreetly behind a lace curtain and peep. So that when, on the next afternoon, the hands of the old-fashioned clock gradually crept nearer to four, as though they said—"Look out! she's getting nearer; here she comes!"—it was a trying moment for the little ladies. Somewhere out in that great wilderness of London a cab was moving; the most important cab in London that afternoon; and in that cab was a child—John Osborne's child. The cabman was making straight for Little Place, Hampstead, and presently would stop at the door of the third house.

Small wonder that the little ladies caught each other now and then making for the drawing-room, and murmured guiltily to each other about a book forgotten, or some such matter as that.

And then the cab came, and Priscilla opened the door, and stood waiting. By that time the little ladies were in the drawing-room, holding hands, and sitting together in the attitude to receive. Priscilla was quite a long time at the door, helping to get in

a tiny trunk that was on the roof of the cab; Miss Dorcas gripped Miss Betsy's hand, as though comfort and strength and consolation were all needed. And then the door was opened, and the child came in, piloted by a woman who was in charge of her.

She was four years of age, and she wore a little black frock for the man who had once promised indefinite things to Miss Betsy in that very room; and she had innocent blue eyes, and a little baby mouth that quivered piteously, and golden hair. She stood quite still, while the woman in charge of her explained that she had been instructed to bring her there, and would now go away again in the cab that was waiting; she did not move until the woman, having been dismissed, was actually gone from the house. Emotion must not be displayed before people who know nothing about you; and therefore neither Miss Dorcas nor Miss Betsy moved until the child was there alone with them. And then Miss Betsy went suddenly down upon her knees, and caught the mite to her starved bosom, and quite surprisingly cried over her a little. Yet perhaps not surprisingly after all.

It must have been something near to twelve o'clock that night when Miss Dorcas fancied that she heard a noise in the house, and got up cautiously. There was just a dim little yellow spot of light on the landing, where the gas had been turned down, as it always was; and there was the door of the room that had been arranged as a sort of temporary nursery; the whole business had had to be a hurried one. Miss Dorcas opened the door softly, and looked in. There, on her knees beside the bed, was Miss

Betsy, with her hands clasped, watching the sleeping child lying there flushed and warm; the other sister crept in softly and joined her. They said no words; they presently stood there and watched. And after a time, when they stole quietly out of the room, they still said nothing; but their eyes were curiously bright as they glanced for a moment at each other before going into their respective rooms.

It had been a business, I can tell you, that taking the mite out into Little Place next morning. They found that she had a good stock of clothes, and the business of dressing her had been performed by the pair of them. It seemed strange that a child like this should chatter so much; and yet that was as it should be, because that sort of music had never been heard by either of them in that house. But it was when they were actually standing in the hall with the child between them, and Priscilla with her hand upon the lock of the door, that they felt the supreme moment had arrived. This was facing the world.

"Are you ready, Betsy?" Miss Doreas had asked in a whisper.

"Yes—it's got to be done!" whispered Miss Betsy, tremulously.

"Then you can open the door, Priscilla," Miss Doreas commanded.

As it happened, they met Major Pennykid just outside the house. Major Pennykid lived at No. 7—the end house against the wall; and Major Pennykid was the autoerat of Little Place. It was the Major who had had the trees lopped at a certain time, after much discussion and much letter-writing between himself and the local authorities; it was Major

Pennykid who had settled exactly at what hour in the morning the dustman was to collect the dust from the seven little houses, and at what particular time the men who swept the roads were to visit Little Place. You couldn't do anything without the Major.

He was stout, and he breathed noisily; he walked with his legs set rather wide apart, and his elbows sticking out. When you came to look at him, you realized that his parents had been wise in deciding very early that he had got to be a Major; he never could have been anything else; he must have been born like that. Now, seeing the little ladies coming tremblingly down the two shallow steps with the child between them, the Major stopped and blew out his breath, and in the very act of swinging off his hat exclaimed—

“God bless us! What's all this?”

“All this?” in the person of Stella, looked up at him shyly; Miss Dorcas began a halting explanation.

“The child—”

“The dear child,” broke in Miss Betsy, in a hurried whisper.

“—of a dead friend—a very dear dead friend,” went on Miss Dorcas in a whisper, and nerved to what she had to say by the touch of little fingers in her thin hand. “Miss Betsy and I are going to look after her; for the future she belongs to us.”

“God bless us!” exclaimed Major Pennykid, looking all around about him as though calling upon the trees and the houses and the very heavens to witness this thing—“but what the devil, madam, do you know about children?”

It was not said unkindly; but Miss Betsy flushed

and drew herself up a little stiffly. "All women know about children—it's an instinct," she said. "And what we don't know we shall learn. Good-morning, Major Pennykid; we are taking Stella for an airing."

So the little ladies went down the street with the child between them, leaving the Major standing staring after them. It took the Major quite a long time to get over this thing, and to resume his walk; new happenings were rare in Little Place, Hampstead.

The progress of the child between Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy was marked by a certain large degree of ceremony. There was a crossing-sweeper who was in the habit of receiving a daily dole; and this time that dole had to be extracted from the purse of Miss Dorcas; a glance had to be exchanged over the head of the child between Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy, and returned with a meaning look, as though Miss Dorcas said—"I think you're right; she should learn these things early;" and finally the money was given by the child to the crossing-sweeper.

Objects of interest were pointed out carefully on the way; for was this not the formal introduction of the child to the little world in which they lived? Mere tradespeople, in the matter of introductions, did not count; they might stare a little wonderingly at seeing the Misses Teakle so accompanied; but one does not tell things to tradespeople nor make explanations.

It had all been very wonderful in that early time. It was wonderful, to begin with, to have the child seated at the same table with them; to find that it was necessary to put a hassock on an ordinary chair, the better to bring the face of the mite more on a level with their own. Most wonderful of all, that

business of the room upstairs where the child slept, and where at night two women who had before been very lonely stole in and watched her while she slept.

Other days, when Miss Betsy, with a tragic face, and without even the precaution of overshoes or an umbrella, had raced out down Little Place, and had tugged frantically at the bell of a house that had a red lamp in front of it; and afterwards had wondered why the doctor could not run as she had run, and why the inhuman brute took such a long time (or so it seemed to Miss Betsy, waiting anxiously beside him) to peel off his gloves and to drop them into his hat on the hall table.

And then had come the surprising incident of the boy next door. The boy next door had never mattered in the least, except as being the rather stodgy son of a neighbor, and, before the advent of Stella, the only child in Little Place. He was just an ordinary boy, and he sometimes made as much noise as a healthy boy can make; also he had a wicked habit of swinging on railings and even climbing one of the trees—a slim one—in Little Place. For the rest, he belonged to Mrs. Fielding at No. 4; and Mrs. Fielding, if talkative and inclined to giggle, was with all that a highly respectable widow, with good money in Consols.

It was when Stella was seven, and Jimmie Fielding next door was a little past eleven, that the thing happened. Mrs. Fielding—round, plump and easy going, and still quite a pretty woman—had “popped in” to see Miss Betsy Teakle for a moment on some little matter; and Jimmie was with her. It being a feminine matter, Jimmie was left to cool his heels

in the little narrow hall, while his mother and Miss Betsy went into the drawing-room. Miss Dorcas descending the stairs soft-footed, saw the amazing thing, and described it afterwards in hushed tones just as she saw it.

Stella came flying from somewhere, saw the boy, and stopped shyly, with her little slow smile. Then she came toward him, and the boy awkwardly put his arm about her shoulders and stooped and kissed her. It was all over in a moment, because they had seen Miss Dorcas, and the boy was awkwardly shuffling his feet and looking at her a little sheepishly. Miss Dorcas held out her hand to him, and hoped, as usual, that he was well; and he thanked her and presently went away with his mother.

Of course Miss Dorcas felt that she ought to tell Miss Betsy. After all, the child had always seemed to belong more, in a sense, to Miss Betsy than to herself, because of the dead John Osborne; more than that, because of John Osborne any affair of the heart seemed naturally to belong to Miss Betsy also. Therefore Miss Dorcas told her, behind closed doors.

"I was coming downstairs and I saw him deliberately kiss her!"

And Miss Betsy laughed. It was almost a girlish laugh—like the far-away echo of some laugh out of her past. "I don't see why not," said Miss Betsy. "He's a nice boy; if he'd let me—which he wouldn't—I should like to kiss him myself."

"Of course, if you think so—" Miss Dorcas murmured helplessly.

Great days, when Stella was allowed to go to tea with Mrs. Fielding, and afterwards was packed off

with Jimmie to a half bare room that had been given up to him as a playroom. There he delightfully domineered over her, and almost bullied her; and there she passionately adored him, and thought he was the most wonderful being in Little Place, or indeed in all the world. And she cried for a whole day when a cab came to Mrs. Fielding's house and took Jimmie away to school, with one large trunk and one plain wooden box on the roof, and a disconsolate and rather frightened Jimmie inside with his mother.

Of course when Jimmie came home for the holidays he knew more about the world than it had seemed possible even for the Major to know; and his adventures, and even the thrashings he had had, showed him to be a hardened creature who could, in an emergency, be depended upon to do great things. Also he was a bit scornful of a class bunched together under the one contemptuous word "girls;" and Stella began to feel that after all perhaps he was right, and they were not much good in the world, and it would have been ever so much finer had her father not been obstinate about it and made her a girl.

In the slow passage of the years pictures rose, and were stamped definitely on Stella's mind, only to fade a little as others took their places. Seasons changed; glorious summers waxed and waned, until the morning arrived (all in a moment, as it seemed) when the Major donned his fur-lined overcoat, thereby making himself appear of such enormous girth as to be quite terrifying, and rubbed his hands and remarked that it was "devilish cold." And all the time, in the summers and the winters, Stella grew up without anyone noticing it in particular, or commenting on it, save

perhaps when it struck Miss Dorcas that frocks would have to be lengthened or new ones provided.

There was one picture that stood out above the others. A picture of Jimmie coming back after a long absence; a new Jimmie, with shy, awkward movements, and a nervous habit of blushing. Jimmie was nineteen then, and Stella nearly fifteen; and, the little ladies being temporarily absent, Stella had received him in the drawing-room where, as boy and girl sweethearts, they had hugged each other and had made arrangements for an early alliance.

There was no hugging now. Stella, very straight and slim, had just touched his hand, and then had self-consciously swung her skirts about, and shaken her mane of hair, and talked about the weather, and hoped that his mother was quite well. And Jimmie had not known what to do with his hands, and had excused himself somewhat abruptly; Stella remembered that he had tripped over a footstool, as he was leaving, and that she had giggled, and had hated herself for it afterwards.

After that, stiff bows when they met; Stella very sure of herself, and Jimmie not sure of himself at all, and blushing furiously as he pulled off a new and unaccustomed silk hat.

The quiet progress of the years was never broken. It seems incredible that in all those fifteen years Stella never went away from Little Place, Hampstead. Perhaps it was not the fashion for Little Place to stir itself as did the noisier world outside. Jimmie came and went, it is true, as has been said; but the sole alteration in the lives of the little ladies and of Stella was that in the summers they went further

afield, out on to the Heath, and sat there to work or read; in the winters they kept within the house, or took short walks for the mere sake of exercise. The house was Stella's world; she had never known any other.

Upstairs, at the very top of the house, was a room long since out of use that had been Stella's nursery. There was an old box there with a broken lid, in which were toys; and many and many an hour the lonely child had spent there, playing with them, and dreaming her dreams. At the head of the stairs, just outside the door of the room, was a little wooden gate that had been fixed there to save a venturesome child from pitching headlong down the stairs. Sometimes even now the girl would steal up there and open the gate that led to that old quiet paradise, and sit there among the shadows, dreaming, or striving to dream, some of the childish things all over again.

Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy had taught her all they knew—taking the subjects in which each was most proficient. All genteel learning, suited for a lady who would live a quiet retired life, just as they had done themselves.

Now to-night, as the girl sat there in the falling dusk, with her slim fingers resting on the keys, she smiled a little, and perhaps scarcely knew why she smiled. She was thinking about Jimmie Fielding—Jimmie who had grown up, and who was tall and broad-shouldered, and had a deep voice; Jimmie who had walked along Little Place that afternoon, having met her quite accidentally at the corner. She remembered that she had felt the touch of his arm against her shoulder as she walked; and it had been a com-

forting touch, and one not to be avoided nor shrunk from.

As I have said once before, it is not considered proper to peer out of your windows in Little Place to see what is going on; but one sees things nevertheless. So it had happened that afternoon that Miss Betsy, in the little faded drawing-room, had been behind the lace curtains when Stella and Jimmie came slowly along; she had watched them as they stopped for a moment on the pavement before each mounted the two sets of shallow steps which led to the door of their respective houses. Jimmie had said something to the girl, and she had looked up at him, and had laughed and colored prettily. Miss Betsy had heaved a little quick sigh, and had turned, even as the bell rang, to find Miss Dorcas at her elbow.

"Stella is getting quite grown up," said Miss Dorcas, softly.

"Not for a long time yet, please God!" Miss Betsy had exclaimed, almost with violence.

The muffin-man was coming down the street. He always came at this time—walking straight along the pavement until he came to the end wall, and then turning slowly, and walking back again, with sidelong glances at the windows. Now and then he would be called from one of the little houses, and then he would rest his wooden tray on the railings and turn back the green cloth, as though reluctantly, and display the dainties underneath. It had been a great excitement in childish days to listen to the muffin-man; Stella turned her head now as he went past.

The door was opened softly, and Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy came in. In the half light it was as

though round the bright hair of the girl there was an aureole; as she sat there, with her finger-tips resting on the keys, the little ladies stood together for a moment, looking at her in silence, as they had done any time those fifteen years.

"What are you doing, my dear?" asked Miss Betsy, softly.

The girl's hands fell to her sides, and she swung slowly round on the music-stool. She laughed and shook her head, as though waking from some vision.

"Dreaming, I think," she said, in that soft voice that was like all the other voices heard in that house. "Just dreaming about things."

CHAPTER II

SPIRITS IN PRISON

In a wretched room—but little better than a garret, but having a wide floor space—were three people. One, a man, lay on an improvised bed in one corner, with his hands crossed behind his head, and with his wide-open scarcely blinking eyes fixed upon the ceiling. He was a giant in stature, huge and rugged looking, with an ugly mask of a face, with the nose all on one side, and with high, prominent cheekbones. He had a mass of unkempt dark hair, in which every now and then as he lay his fingers worked restlessly. His shoes, projecting over the end of the bed, had the soles worn through.

The second was a woman of slatternly appearance, who was bending over the narrow fireplace, preparing some food. She had just the attitude of a dumb, patient creature, set to do a certain task, and doing it without any reference to her surroundings, or any thought of them.

The third was a young man—a mere boy, who was standing at the window looking out over the roofs of the houses. He was slim and finely built; his face, seen in profile, was like a finely-cut and rounded cameo; it was almost the face of a girl. His hair was long, and every now and then, with an impatient

gesture, he swept it back from his forehead. The fact that it was almost dead black accentuated the pallor of his face. He leaned there in an easy attitude, and seemed of the three the most incongruous figure in the room.

As though unconsciously he began to sing—just breathing out the notes with scarcely any effort, and in a mere whisper. It was the “Salve di Mora” from *Faust*; and although the singing was of the faintest it seemed to fill the room.

The man on the bed rolled slowly over on his side until he could face the boy. And then the hand that was uppermost began mechanically to beat time, with the long supple fingers moving gently. The boy, catching sight of the movement, strengthened his voice, and the melody poured out in a flood. Gradually, as it went on, the man sat up, now moving both hands, and speaking quickly in good English but with a strong foreign accent.

“Gently—gently—my little one. So! Lift it—higher—”

The voice died away, and the swaying hands ceased their movement. The woman at the fire had not stirred; the man sat on the end of the bed, with his hands thrust in his pockets, moodily regarding the boy.

“It shall not be permitted to you to sing better than that when you float aloft and are promoted to the angelic choir,” said the big man. “The heavens shall ring with it, even if this dull world, where the pigs live, will not listen to it. And it is my voice—I that made it say so. And to think that it is shut up here—the last refuge—and with a woman that has

an eye for a saucepan and never any ear for a note of music. Bah!"

The woman turned from the fire, and began to arrange the food she had been cooking on a table. The floor was bare, save for a worn-out rug before the fireplace; there were two chairs and a stool and a piano at one side of the room. That was all the furniture, save for the ramshackle bed that was partly screened by a curtain that could be drawn along a string.

The boy had taken to pacing up and down the floor, still murmuring little snatches of melody to himself; the big man on the end of the bed was watching him, now and then shrugging his shoulders, and raising his eyebrows, and making a little quick gesture with one hand, as though communing with himself. The woman at the table raised her lack-lustre eyes and pushed back a wisp of hair from her face, and spoke. Her voice was common, and had the tired drawl of the Cockney in it.

"You can come on. It's all ready," she said. "May as well make the most of it, from what I can see; there ain't much more you'll git."

"That is not for you to say," exclaimed the big man, sharply, as he rose from the bed, drawing himself to a height that almost touched the low ceiling of the garret. "To you it is given always to repine—always to fear that that which you eat is the last mouthful, and that to-morrow we die of starvation. It is a cheerful disposition to live with, as I have long since discovered. You are best, my Bathsheba, when you say nothing and one does not look at you. Come—let us eat."

"I'm not hungry, thank you," said the boy, turning away toward the window.

The big man moved quickly across to him, and dropped an arm about his shoulders, and spoke gently and coaxingly, as to a child. "Nonsense!—my singing bird must eat, or how shall he sing? Is this your gratitude to your Gustave—he that has given you the voice of a god—he who will one day smile with you at all this, and feast with you royally; he who will look on with a proud heart while great ladies kiss your hands, and weep, and love you? Be not a coward; we will feast together now, as we have feasted often and often—and shall—mark you this, Bathsheba the doleful!—as we shall continue to feast. Come!"

The boy suffered himself to be led to the table, and to take a seat. The big man helped the boy first, while the woman sat in silence; then he helped himself; finally he curtly pushed the dish toward the woman. While he ate he watched the boy from time to time, and presently gave a little nod of satisfaction when he saw that the youngster had begun, with something of the appetite of youth, to clear his plate.

The big man ate coarsely and almost savagely; gesticulating now and then with his knife or fork, or with a piece of bread, as he went on talking, with his mouth full.

"It is said that when a soldier is driven to the last of his earthworks he fights the better. So you shall find it to be with Gustave Vasserot. Honest Gustave has had his little house, and his studio also, to which his pupils have come to make music (more or

less, as God had given them voices or had withheld them!) to him; evil days have fallen on Gustave; the little house has gone, and vampires have seized upon the furniture; Gustave finds himself in a garret, with his piano as the sole thing left to him, and a dolt of a woman—”

“I do my best,” said the woman, sulkily, without looking up.

“The heavens witness it!” he exclaimed, with a change of manner, and a hand laid for a moment on hers. “It is not your fault that God did not endow you with graces; one must not expect everything. To resume: Gustave Vasserot, teacher of music and great artist himself, finds himself driven to his last stronghold; the last food purchased; the abominable rent due—and no money wherewith to pay it. But—mark you this!—does Gustave Vasserot repine?”

He threw out his chest, and expanded his arms, and smiled at the boy. The boy laughed, showing for a moment beautiful small white teeth. “You never did repine, Gustave,” he said. “Only I get impatient; I’m sick to death of contemplating those endless rows of tiles out there—sick to death of waiting. If it goes on much longer I shall go out, and I shall sing in the streets.”

“Never!” Gustave Vasserot sprang to his feet, overturning his chair as he did so. “Never! That voice shall be heard—I that made it say so—in its proper place, or nowhere at all. I that know every note of it say this thing; I will be obeyed. Such a voice comes once, and once only, in years—in centuries. At the moment we stand still; we are useless; we are idle. But the moment must come when we shall look back

upon this"—he swept his arms out to indicate the dingy room—"and shall laugh at it, even if with the laughter there are tears at the recollection. As I have said, we have come to the end—but to the end only for a moment—a little speck of time. We will presently review ourselves and the situation; we will find a way."

"There is always the piano," said the boy, bitterly. "That would fetch something, and we might be able to live a week or two longer."

Gustave Vasserot picked up the chair with a quick action, and drew it beside that of the boy; put an arm about his shoulders, and spoke with another sudden change of manner. "There is not the piano; there never can be the piano," he said gently. "Here—you"—with a flick of his long fingers he called the attention of the woman—"clear all this away; the sight of it revolts me, and when I am revolted I cannot think and I cannot speak. And do it silently," he added, as she clattered a couple of plates together—"there is never any music about you. Now, little master"—he turned again to the boy and spoke caressingly—"you are piping on the wrong note; you have been on the wrong note quite a long time lately, and it will not do. I say it clearly and distinctly; it will not do! I, Gustave Vasserot, will not have it! Do you take me for a fool, that I should have given up all for you, and for the voice that I have dragged out of the very soul of you? No—no; I know too well what I have done. Somewhere in this great city"—still with his arm round the boy's shoulders he flung out the other hand toward the window,—"somewhere in this great city there are those who shall help us;

it is imperative. There are those to whom we can go, and to whom we can speak of this thing; those who will understand."

"We have no money, my dear Gustave, and we are lean and shabby," answered the boy. "Also I regret to remind you, my dear Gustave, that your shoes are broken and your coat is torn."

"What are shoes; what is a coat?" demanded Gustave, with fine contempt. "But a voice is much—it is all. Let us, little master, as I have said, review the position."

He had removed his arm from the boy's shoulders; now across the cleared table he leaned forward, and began to talk of what they should do, in his rapid fashion, and with many gestures. And as he talked, and as he looked at the face of the boy, his own ugly mask was transfigured, and an eager light came into his eyes.

"Where did I find you? By the merest chance, wandering about with a father that was dissolute—I speak only with frankness, for your sake—for both our sakes. That father that was dissolute had had a voice—God of the singing angels!—what a voice! But he had raised too many wine cups in honor of it for it to be anything at all by the time I had found him. Remnants of a voice—fragments of something wonderful—but a voice in reality—no! But the boy that was with him had not known what it was to raise little wine cups; I was in time to save him. I have sacrificed much for the voice I have made, and I shall sacrifice yet more. All that is written in the scheme of things that shall not be changed. It is of the moment we think, and of the moment only.

Figure to yourself, little master, that I am father to you, in place of the debauched one that is dead—that I am mother to you, in place of an angel that is in Heaven; put that to your mind clearly. I do not say that if you could not sing I should love you; but I cannot figure to myself any time when you could not sing; it is impossible. But my love for you avails nothing; I am as a rat driven into a corner and helpless."

"Well—and what are you going to do?" demanded the boy. "When my father died—"

"But a little twelve months ago," broke in Vasserot.

"There was no money left for me; he had gambled it all away. Oh, yes—I know; I'm not a child. Also he had drunk it all away—money that had come to him from my mother—"

"An angel in Heaven!" exclaimed Vasserot, kissing his finger-tips toward the grimy ceiling. "I knew her."

"And but for you I must have starved. You were good to me; you've given me my father's voice, and something else besides. But it doesn't help us, Gustave—it doesn't help us. We are in prison here, and we can do nothing."

"We can do much; we can do everything," responded the other, hammering the table softly. "We must think; we must put our mind to this problem that faces us. Think me not selfish when I say to you that you are my chance—my opportunity. If your voice stirs me so that you bring tears to my eyes and stirrings to my heart, it is but to remind me that that voice is a voice of gold, and shall be paid for in gold. You that have been dragged about all over Europe,

and never allowed to sleep until hours that were unholy (and the marvel is that the voice has remained, and is what I have made it)—you are fit for nothing but to sing. The world of men that toil and slave is not for you; but that world, when it is tired, shall throw gold to you, because you will remind them that, when the work is over, there is a Heaven above us where angels sing—but not better than you! Remember that always; to sing better than you is impossible. But at the moment we require even shillings to be thrown to us; the gold shall come later. Now, think, little master, and forgive your Gustave that he makes you think of such a sordid and brutal thing; is there no one to whom we can turn—to whom we can say—‘Here is a voice of gold; here is an Israfel, whose heart-strings are a lute; and yet here is one who demands food and clothing and lodging?’ Think, little master!”

“How should I know anyone that would help me?” said the boy, impatiently. “My father never told me very much about himself; only sometimes my mother used to talk to me about her girlhood, and about her sisters.”

“Ah—her girlhood and her sisters. We are getting along; we are going along famously. The mother that is now an angel in Heaven”—he kissed his finger-tips again toward the ceiling—“and who brought to your father a fortune which he dissipated. You are not to think of these things; it is left to your Gustave to think of them. The fact that your mother brought to your father a fortune, and that she has spoken to you of her sisters, shows that she comes or derives herself from a family that is rich. It is

a simple piece of reasoning, and I present it to you complete."

"I believe she ran away with my father; I have a sort of idea that the family cut her off," said the boy, dreamily. "I know that she never saw any of them again, although I believe that she used to write to them—her sisters, I mean—and I think they wrote to her."

"We are getting nearer and nearer—and yet nearer," exclaimed Vasserot, eagerly, leaning forward across the table. "The fact that they are sisters, and not brothers, interests me greatly; women are always so much more easy to deal with; one endeavors first to touch their hearts and to draw forth the tears of sentiment. I like it very much that they are sisters."

"I think my mother had been the baby of the family—and a little spoiled," went on the boy, with his face between his hands, and his elbows on the table. "She must have been very pretty when she was younger."

"She must have been divine!" exclaimed Vasserot. "I seem to see it all; the spoiled baby growing up with sisters more staid and elderly than herself; finally, in her loveliness, tempted away from her home by a man who at that time had a voice of gold. Not your gold, little master, but something coarser. She writes to the sisters, and they write to her; surely a sign that they have forgiven her, and that they long to know how she is progressing. The sole question remains: where are those sisters—where are those letters?"

"I tell you, my dear Gustave, that it is useless to

trouble about the matter at all," answered the boy. "All this happened years ago, just after I was born; and you know that I am now over twenty. My mother used to talk very vaguely about them; she always suggested to me that they were older than she was—a great deal older. I expect they're dead long ago. We can't rake up the past, my dear Gustave, to help us in the present. You must try something else."

"It is a habit with me never to try something else until the one thing has failed," retorted Gustave Vasserot. "You will admit that these sisters had an existence; it is folly to suppose that they must have died just to please you, and to make your story adjust itself. Tell me, first, what was your mother's name?"

"Ruth," answered the boy.

"I know that—I know that!" exclaimed the other impatiently. "I have heard it a hundred times; and it is a name of beauty. But the other name—the name she gave up when she married a man who was to do his best and his worst to degrade her. What was that?"

"A funny sort of name; I've almost forgotten it," answered the boy, knitting his brows in perplexity. "She did tell me. It began, I fancy, with a T. I have it; it was Teakle. That was it—Ruth Teakle."

"It is a name abominable, and with no music in it; but it sounds English," answered Gustave, complacently. "Also it has the merit of being uncommon; such a person or persons, having such a name, should be easy to be discovered. We will find these Teakles; we will throw ourselves upon their mercy and their

charity. It is unfortunate that you are not more like your mother in appearance—but that does not matter. Now, where in all the wide world are we to discover these people of the name of Teakle? I demand them of you!"

"How should I know? I only know that they lived somewhere in London."

"In London!" Gustave raised his arms with a dramatic gesture, and smiled. "It is becoming absurdly easy. They lived somewhere in London—and here are we in London; it is as though we had met them already. There is a simplicity about this that touches me."

"You don't seem to understand how big London is," said the boy. "And even if we find them they may refuse to have anything to do with us."

"We shall find them, and they will not refuse," answered Gustave, placidly. "Those are little matters which you will leave to me for arrangement. It is sufficient that we have the name, and that we have them here located in London. All that is wonderful, and we can now proceed to business. I could not have believed that the thing was a matter of such great simplicity."

"You quite lose sight of the fact that they are probably dead," urged the boy.

"I lose sight of no facts; but I do not believe it is possible for a benign Providence to have slain them," said Gustave. "Why should He have placed sisters here in London, only to cheat us at the lost moment, and laugh at us? It is incredible. Now, is it possible"—he spoke in a wheedling tone, and leaned forward across the table—"is it possible that an angel

—now in Heaven, alas!—is it possible that that angel may, out of motives of sentiment, have kept those letters; is it possible that they still exist? Think, little master—think!”

“There are a lot of old papers that belonged to my father—old letters, and things of no value,” answered the boy. “I have them in my trunk; I’ve never even looked over them. My mother may have kept old letters; it is just barely possible.”

“Being just barely possible makes it almost a probability,” answered Vasserot, rising to his feet. “We will see these letters; we will inspect them, and discover if by chance the ladies of the abominable name of Teakle with no music in it still exist. If they exist, you may trust Gustave Vasserot to stir them, if they have hearts in them to be stirred, or from which tears may be wrung. Come—the letters!”

The boy went away into a sort of ante-room in which he slept—a meaner garret even than the other. On his knees there he routed about in the depths of a trunk that had very little in it save odd sheets of music; when presently he pulled himself upright he found Vasserot towering over him. He held up a little package tied round with a faded ribbon.

“These are the only letters there are addressed to my mother,” he said—“and it looks like a woman’s writing.”

Vasserot took them. “It is a woman’s writing, and they are addressed to your mother. See—it is here—‘Mrs. Michael Doran.’ We will inspect them without delay.”

He carried the packet into the larger room, and seated himself there, and spread them out before

him on the table. They were addressed to various places, mostly abroad; there were some half-dozen of them. He was proceeding to extract the first from its envelope, when the boy laid a hand upon it, and very quietly took it away from him.

"They were sent to my mother," said the boy. "I think I'll look at them first."

Gustave Vasserot raised his eyebrows and his shoulders; swept the letters into a little heap, and turned away from the table. "It was but to save you trouble," he said; "but of a certainty the right is yours."

The boy held the letter for a moment or two, as he glanced through it; then he spoke aloud. "I won't read it to you; it's the sort of thing that only a woman could write, and that only a woman ought to read. It's years old—the year after I was born. It's a beautiful letter, full of love and tenderness."

"It is love and tenderness for which we are looking," said Vasserot. "The address—the place where love and tenderness are to be found? What is the address?"

"No. 3, Little Place, Hampstead," said the boy, slowly. "And the letter is signed, 'Ever your loving sister—Betsy.' "

"It is well; it is admirable," exclaimed Gustave Vasserot. "Unless the loving sister Betsy has joined her sister in the angelic choir, I go immediately to discover her at the Little Place, Hampstead."

CHAPTER III

A MAN IN A HURRY

THE lamps were lighted at No. 3, Little Place. The hearth was cleanly swept and the curtains drawn, and Priscilla, the elderly maid, had put on her best cap and apron. She went through that performance only once a week, and on this particular night of the week; she had done that as long as she could remember. For on this particular evening Major Pennykid and Mrs. Fielding stepped round from their respective houses, and came to visit Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy, for the express purpose of playing whist. That was an institution that not even the coming of Stella as a child had altered.

Incidentally, it may be mentioned that, as the hour approached when the visitors were due, Major Pennykid's ancient man-servant peeped forth from the door of the Major's house, and watched for Mrs. Fielding to bustle out of her house, and go round the intervening railings, and ring the bell at No. 3; then, when the serving-man duly reported that Mrs. Fielding had gone, the Major took his hat and cane, and strutted down the length of Little Place, and duly arrived at No. 3. Dignity demanded that the Major should be the last to arrive, and so create something of a little dramatic entrance for himself.

Flora Fielding had had time to kiss Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy and Stella, each on the cheek, and had spoken about the distinct chill there was in the air this evening, before the Major put in an appearance. Priscilla knew his habits so well, and was so absolutely certain that he would arrive within a minute or so of the coming of Mrs. Fielding, that she had not even troubled to go downstairs, but had waited at the end of the little hall until he rang the bell. On entering, the Major put his hat on the little hall table, and laid his cane beside it; in the very act of drawing off his gloves he tucked in his chin, and looked roguishly at Priscilla, and made exactly the same remark which he always made.

"Well, Priscilla, and how do we find ourselves this evening—eh? Still with the bloom on?"

And Priscilla made reply, although the bloom to which the Major referred had faded somewhat in the course of years—"Yes, thank you kindly, sir."

After that the Major walked into the drawing-room, and stood for a moment just within the door, looking round him, and then made precisely the same remark he always did when he had arrived at that particular spot on the carpet—"Bless us! am I the last?"

Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy were standing to receive him, side by side as usual; Mrs. Flora Fielding had found the most comfortable chair, and was lounging in it. The Major shook hands with his hostesses, and then a little roguishly with Mrs. Fielding, as who should say, "There is no necessity for us to be precise and formal, Flora Fielding; we know the world—don't we. You're a widow, and I'm a soldier—a bit of the dog in both of us—eh?"

After that, of course, there was Stella to be greeted. The Major had never kissed her in his life; he had begun by being a little afraid of her, when she was a mite of a child to whom he had stooped to shake her hand, and he had never got out of the habit of shaking her hand since. It must have been when she was a long-legged girl, with skirts just below her knees, that the Major, meeting her unexpectedly alone in Little Place one day, decided that the moment had arrived when he should take off his hat to her; and that marked the point when he began to think of her as really growing up. So now he crossed the room to where she was standing, and took her hand and shook it gently.

“Growing up, and growing tall,” was the Major’s comment. “God bless us—and I remember the day when I used to get a crick in the back stooping to talk to you. Let’s see—how old are we?”

“Nearly nineteen, Major Pennykid,” said Stella, with a blush.

“It’s a great age,” said the Major, wagging his head at her humorously—“a tremendous age. I verily believe,” he added, with a glance at his own rotundity, “that I was as slim as you are when I was nineteen. Seems incredible, but it’s true. I’ve got a picture somewhere of myself in my first uniform. Mighty good-looking chap in those days, I can tell you.”

“We can quite believe it, Major, I assure you,” said Flora Fielding.

“Flatterer!” exclaimed the Major, wheeling round on her. “However, this isn’t business, and it cer-

tainly isn't whist. Whist is a serious business—or it should be."

"You're always in such a hurry, Major," said Mrs. Fielding. "One would think that you would be glad of at least five minutes of neighborly chat before settling down for the evening at cards."

"Chat, madam?" cried the Major. "There's far too much chatting goes on—everywhere." (This from the Major, who talked hard the whole time he played, and who was capable even of stopping a neighbor in Little Place, and engaging him in conversation for half an hour at a time, was a little strange.) "Everybody talks a great deal too much; there ought to be a law against it. By the way, where's Jimmie?"

"He's coming in presently," said Mrs. Fielding. "He has some letters to write."

"Then poor Stella will have to sit glum in a corner all by herself," said the Major. "Or perhaps she'd like to go next door and talk to Jimmie there?"

"Why, child, what are you blushing at?" asked Mrs. Fielding.

"I didn't think I was blushing," said poor Stella, with four pairs of eyes upon her. "There's nothing to blush about."

"Of course there isn't," exclaimed the Major. "Young hearts—and love's young dream—and all the rest of it. Gad! haven't I been through the game myself, though I did escape with just a scorching."

"I think, Major, that it's quite time we started whist," said Miss Dorcas, a little stiffly.

"I certainly think we should begin," said Miss Betsy.

They cut for partners, and seated themselves at

the table. The Major kept up a running comment as he dealt for the first time, having Miss Betsy opposite to him.

"No offence intended—not the slightest. And I wasn't putting notions in her head that aren't there already, I'm certain. It's no use trying to blink facts; she'll fall in love, just the same as she caught the measles; she's bound to. I was in love and out of it half a dozen times before I was five-and-twenty. It's a natural state of things, and you can't check it. Why, I can assure you, ladies—"

"A misdeal," said Miss Dorcas, sharply.

The Major was silenced for a moment; he swore softly to himself, and luckily unintelligibly, as he swept the cards together again and started afresh.

Stella sat with her hands folded in her lap, listlessly watching the players. After all, this was like every other evening of her life, save for the presence of the Major and Flora Fielding. On other evenings she sat there, reading or working, while Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy sat on either side of the fire, or at the window when the weather was fine, and worked also. Sometimes she played and sang, but not often; the little ladies were so used to silence that, although they were proud of the accomplishments they had taught the girl, they did not often request her to display them. After a time, during which the Major had kept up a running flow of comments and remarks, he glanced round at the little clock on the mantel-shelf, and, in the very act of playing a card, asked suddenly:

"What the deuce has become of Jimmie? Jimmie ought to have been here ages ago."

"I left him writing letters," said Mrs. Fielding, mildly.

"What's he want writing letters this time of night?" snapped the Major. "Bad for his eyes. I don't write letters by candlelight," he added, as if that clenched the matter.

Just then there came a ring at the bell, and Stella started to her feet. "I expect that's Jimmie," she faltered. "May I let him in?"

"Certainly, my dear," said Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy in one breath; and Stella went quickly out of the room, closing the door behind her.

The Major solemnly winked at Miss Dorcas, who turned her head aside. "Glad enough to let him in too; and I shouldn't be surprised if it didn't take them quite a long time to open the door, and then to get it shut again. I know; I've been young myself."

Stella had opened the hall door, and had seen the dim figure of Jimmie Fielding looming large before her at the top of the steps. Although she held the door open he made no attempt to come in. He stood there, looking solemnly at her as she leaned forward a little to peer at him.

"What's the matter?" the girl asked in a whisper.

"Nothing," he said slowly. And then, after a shy pause—"I say, Stella—won't you come out for a minute?"

"Come out?" she faltered.

"There's something I want to tell you. It's quite fine; slip a shawl round your shoulders, and come down to the end of Little Place, and back again. It won't take a minute."

This was an adventure. Stella turned quickly, and ran up the stairs; snatched a shawl, and drew it round her shoulders as she ran down again. She joined Jimmie on the step outside, pulling the door softly after her, but not latching it. And then Jimmie walked away about half a dozen paces, and stood still, and looked down at the sweet, serious face upturned to his.

"You've taken a long time over your letters," said Stella, wondering why he did not speak.

"I've not been writing letters," he said in a burst. "I've been walking up and down the pavement here, ever since the mater left. I've been walking up and down from one end to the other, thinking, and making up my mind; I've been forming phrases and sticking words together—and now it's all gone. When I look at you, everything has gone straight out of my head, and I don't know what to say to you."

"What do you want to say to me?" she asked in a whisper.

"That makes it easier. I want to say that I—that I love you. I didn't mean, of course, to blurt it out like that; I was going to wrap it up, and say all sorts of nice things—just to prepare you, as it were. And now—now it's all over—and I had meant that it should take quite a long time. There were some beautiful things I was going to say to you."

"Could there be anything more beautiful than you have said, Jimmie?" she asked. "It's the sweetest thing that a girl could hear; and somehow or other I seem to know now that I've almost been expecting you to say it—almost hoping you'd say it."

"Oh, my dear, I never hoped for a moment . . .

and here I've been such a fool as to walk up and down here, wondering how I should ever have the cheek to tell you. After all, it's such a tremendous thing to say to anybody, isn't it?"

"It's a beautiful thing," said Stella. "Shall I say it too? I love you."

He put his arms about her, and bent his head and kissed her—there in the quiet street with no one to see them. "It's the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me in all my life," he said solemnly.

"And now I must run back; they'll all be wondering what on earth has become of me," said the girl, hurriedly. "And, Jimmie, dear, we won't say a word yet to anybody—"

"No—not to a soul."

"It'll just be our wonderful secret for a little time at least," she whispered. "Come."

Meanwhile, in the little drawing-room of No. 3 the party had been so intent upon their cards that the very existence of Stella had been forgotten. The Major had taken a very long time to make up his mind, at one particular point, which card he should play; and as it was a nice point in the game the others had been watching him. It was only when the last card was down that Miss Betsy, with a glance toward where the girl had been sitting, remembered that she had gone out to open the door to Jimmie.

"Why—what's become of Stella?" she asked blankly.

"Gone to open the door to Jimmie," said the Major, slyly.

Miss Betsy had half risen from her chair when the

door opened, and Jimmie came slowly in. He always loomed large in any room where other people were; to-night he seemed to hold himself better even than usual. Stella came shyly behind him, and slipped into her chair.

"We quite wondered what had become of Stella," exclaimed Miss Dorcas.

"I was only talking to Jimmie," said Stella, faintly, glad that he should be standing almost in front of her, and that that end of the room was partly in shadow.

"Yes—we were just chatting," said Jimmie, heavily. "Good-evening, everybody. I think it's turned a bit colder."

He seated himself beside Stella, and for a moment their eyes met; hers were soft and tender, and he thought that he had never seen that look in them before. She cast her eyes down upon her folded hands at once, and Jimmie looked at the ceiling in earnest contemplation.

Jimmie very rarely said anything on those evenings when he accompanied his mother to No. 3. It was his habit to sit square-shouldered and with arms folded, stealing a look now and then at the girl; he was quite content with that. To-night was so wonderful that all was changed; that which he had longed and hungered for was his at last, and his life seemed rounded and completed. Just to sit beside her, knowing what he did, and remembering what she had said, was something that brought the big fellow near to tears.

Exactly at half-past nine, and not a moment sooner nor a moment later, the door was opened, and Priscilla entered, bearing a tray. On that tray was

a decanter of wine and three wine-glasses, a decanter of brandy, a crystal jug of water, one tumbler and a plate of mixed biscuits. The game being now at an end, and the cards back in their case, Priscilla deposited this tray upon the table and departed.

There was, of course, as in all such matters, a formula to be gone through; and it was always exactly the same formula. Miss Dorcas, with her hand upon the neck of the wine decanter, turned with a smiling face to Flora Fielding, and put a polite question:

“Just half a glass, Mrs. Fielding?”

“Well—no—I don’t think I will.”

“It’s a very light wine; I don’t think it could possibly hurt you.”

“Well, perhaps I will. Just half a glass.”

Whereupon Miss Dorcas filled the glass to the brim, and passed it across to Flora Fielding, who thanked her, and sipped it with genteel lips.

Miss Betsy being appealed to in the same fashion smiled doubtfully, and then said, “Oh—one must, I suppose, keep a guest company,” and accepted her glass. Finally it came to the turn of the Major.

“Not being learned in the ways of gentlemen, I must ask you to help yourself, Major,” said Miss Dorcas. “Also I think I may say, as I am given to understand they do at public dinners and such like places—though I was never there, but our dear papa has told me—I think I may say, Gentlemen, you may smoke.”

This being the only joke that Miss Dorcas had ever been known to perpetrate, and one which she perpetrated once a week with great regularity, there was

much laughter on the part of everybody, and the Major pulled out a cigar-case. Jimmie Fielding, with a look of intense relief on his face, took out a pipe and a tobacco-pouch, and leisurely filled the pipe, and lit it. The Major carefully cut the end of a cigar, and lighted it, and puffed, and looked at the ash, and frowned at it critically.

And Miss Dorcas smothered a sigh, thinking of wide-open windows in the morning, and curtains that must be shaken. To Miss Betsy the smell of tobacco brought back memories; for John Osborne, that vacillating lover, had been a great smoker, and the nostalgia of those dead years seemed to come back to her.

"And now," said the Major, leaning back in his chair, and twisting his glass round and round, and surveying its contents, "what does everyone say to a little music?"

Mrs. Fielding said, of course, that it would be delightful, and Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy, as in one breath, said, "Come, Stella dear." Stella rose from her chair and went to the piano; Jimmie drew himself up out of his chair, and went with her. She seated herself, looking up at him for a moment with that smile that was so new and so wonderful; then, after the preliminary bars, the light, pretty, girlish voice broke into "Il Bacio."

"Bright-ly shines the morn-ing—shines the morn-ing
On my lo-ove so fair—"

There was a sudden violent ringing of the bell. The girl's voice trailed off and died away; the Major turned his head sharply, and stared at the door;

Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy rose slowly to their feet simultaneously.

"I wonder who can be coming here at this time of night," exclaimed Miss Dorcas. And then, as she heard the slow steps of Priscilla going along the little hall toward the door, she added calmly, "It must be a mistake. Go on, my love; there is no need for you to interrupt your song."

The song recommenced. Through it and above it they could all hear an argument going on in the little hall; a gruff, guttural voice above Priscilla's mild tones. And then the door was suddenly opened with violence, and a man literally sprang into the room.

It was Gustave Vasserot. Heaven~~s~~ knows what resolution he had made as he found his way toward Little Place, Hampstead, on that mission to the Teakle sisters; but they were gone in a moment when he heard the voice of Stella singing. Everything was forgotten; the teacher and the artist rose above everything. While Priscilla stood staring in the doorway, and while the others stood gazing blankly at this giant with the ugly mask of a face and the wild hair, Vasserot tossed his hat into a corner, and strode to the piano; literally lifted Stella from the stool, and seated himself upon it, and ran his long fingers over the keys.

"God of the singing angels!—not that—never like that, my little canary!" he exclaimed, with a shiver. "It is for you to smooth yourself—never to jump up and down—arriving with no lightness, but always with jerks. Thus?" He threw his head back, and rolled it round, and began to play—and at the same

time to sing, drawing out the notes, and occasionally lifting his right hand to beat the time.

“Fairies of love, little canary (for of such you have to think in singing this), do not hop, nor do they prance; they glide. Some day you shall learn the difference, and then you will understand.”

He ran his fingers over the keys, and then rose to his feet, and made a low bow in the direction of the amazed Miss Dorcas and the equally amazed Miss Betsy. Instinct had taught him that these must be the elderly sisters he had come to find.

“Ladies, I have to make my most profound excuses,” he said. “But it is impossible for me to hear a voice but that I must strive at once to improve it; and music that is not the music it should be drives me always to distraction. It hurts me—it wounds me—here!” He clapped his right hand over his heart, and shivered again.

“Who are you, sir?” exclaimed the Major, momentarily recovering from his astonishment.

“I fear you have come to the wrong house,” said Miss Dorcas, mildly.

“Will you kindly state your business?” exclaimed Jimmie.

“I implore you—one at a time!” exclaimed Vasserot, with his palms to his ears. “I will explain all; I will tell all. But I cannot speak if I am excited; I cannot utter a syllable if I am unnerved. And now I am unnerved; I tremble; I shake myself to pieces. Excuse me, sir.”

He stepped to the table and picked up the Major’s tumbler, which was empty, and poured some brandy into it. “In the name of my Art, I know that I need

not ask forgiveness. It is the thought of my Art that causes me to tremble like this." He poured the liquor down his throat, and set down the glass; shook his mane of hair, and smiled round upon the astounded company, as one who would say, "My life is saved; I am properly grateful. You need have no further fear on my account."

The pause he made was a dramatic one. The tall, shabby figure seemed to dominate everyone else in the room. After a moment or two he looked straight at the Major, indicating him by a slight bow.

"You have asked me, sir, what is my name; I give it gladly, because it is a name of which I am proud, and of which probably you have heard. Gustave Vasserot, Professor of Music—extremely at your service. You have heard of me?"

"Never in my life," answered the Major, bluntly.

"That is a great pity; I commiserate you," was the instant retort. He turned to Miss Dorcas. "A lady here"—he kissed the tips of his fingers and smiled—"has suggested to me that I have brought myself to the wrong house. Madam, receive my assurances that I am very much at the right house. This is, I believe, No. 3 in the Little Place, Hampstead, is it not?"

"Yes," said Miss Doreas, a little faintly.

"And there lives here a lady, or it may be two ladies, of the distinguished name—almost a musical name—of Teakle?"

"I am Miss Teakle, and this is my sister," said Miss Dorcas.

"It is wonderful—it is amazing!" exclaimed Vasserot. "This morning I did not know even that two

such ladies were in the world; this evening it is my pleasure to bow myself before them. Again I say that it is wonderful!"

"But what do you want with us?" asked Miss Betsy, with more courage than her sister.

"Madam, I am here to tell you," he replied. "It is a story that will move you—that will shake your gentle hearts and bring tears to your eyes. I, myself, when I think of it, feel a fluttering in my breast, and there is a mist before my eyes because of unshed tears. But come"—he looked round the room, as though arranging his audience—"let us seat ourselves; let us establish ourselves in comfort. We are, I trust, all friends here—friends of the Miss Teakle and her sister?"

There was a momentary pause. The Major was bursting with curiosity, and so was Mrs. Fielding; Jimmie only saw in this something which menaced the peace and happiness of Stella. But the sisters, who, of course, had no possible idea of what Vasserot had come to talk about, looked a little uneasily at their guests. Mrs. Fielding, a little reluctantly, made a move to go.

"I'm sorry that anything should break up our pleasant evening," said Miss Dorcas, holding out a hand to her.

"Yes, but look here, do you know anything about this fellow?" demanded the Major, suddenly breaking in. "What's all this cock-and-bull story he wants to tell you?"

"I speak of no cock-and-bull," exclaimed Vasserot, quickly. "But Miss Teakle is right; it is perhaps a tale only for the ears of herself and her sister. In

my excitement at finding these ladies I had perhaps overleaped myself."

"If you're quite satisfied, Miss Teakle, that the man is not an impostor, or that he really has something of importance to tell you, I suppose it's all right," said the Major. "But if you say the word—"

Vasserot drew himself up haughtily and looked at the Major. "Lest you should find yourself disquieted on account of these ladies, I will tell them now just so much as will make them understand that I come here not as an impostor, but with the right to speak. I will ask them if, in the years that have gone, they had a sister—a young and beautiful sister, though it is not necessary to say that when one looks upon their faces," he added, gallantly—"a sister who bore the name of Ruth?"

"Little Ruth?" said Miss Dorcas, quickly, as she gazed eagerly at him.

"You observe?" said Vasserot to the Major. "You will be quick to see the agitation of these ladies; you will assure yourself that I bring no tale of cock-and-bull. And I do not think that it is necessary for anyone to remain but these ladies."

"If you come to us, sir, with any news of her—" began Miss Dorcas, in a shaking voice.

"I do," answered Vasserot, with a quick nod. "I do but wait to tell you."

"Very well," said the Major, evidently feeling that with him lay the initiative. "We will go. And if you should require any sound advice, ladies, you are well aware that I am to be relied upon, and you know where to find me. I will wish you good-evening."

"We must be going also," said Mrs. Fielding, pick-

ing up the shawl that had been hanging over the back of her chair, and adjusting it round her shoulders. "I do hope that you're not going to hear anything tragic, my dears, because if you do you won't sleep, and when one doesn't sleep all sorts of dreadful things happen, and you never know what the end will be. Good-night. Good-night."

She kissed Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy on the cheek, and turned to Stella, to whom she administered a like salute. "Come, Jimmie," she said.

"I shall walk up and down outside the house until he goes," whispered Jimmie to Stella. "Then I shall know that you're safe."

She smiled her gratitude to him, and then glanced at Vasserot. Vasserot, master of the situation, stood with folded arms waiting for the guests to depart, and bowing very slightly as each passed out. Miss Dorcas saw them to the door, and presently came back into the room and joined her sister.

"And this young lady?" demanded Vasserot, pointing to Stella.

"Is one of us," answered Miss Betsy, quietly. "An adopted—niece. You may speak freely before her."

"It is well. Let us now compose ourselves, while I relate to you that which has brought me to your charming house to-night. Believe me, ladies, in the end you shall say to me that I have done well; you shall be ready almost to bless me for the trouble to which I have put myself. Let us sit—and let me beg that you will dismiss from yourselves any thought that I speak for myself. I am here on behalf of another."

He seated himself near to the piano; Miss Dorcas

and Miss Betsy sat at the other end of the room on a couch; Stella sat near them. The girl was watching this extraordinary man intently; she wondered what he was going to say. She wondered still more that the sisters should have allowed her to remain; she had never heard before of that other sister of whom this man had spoken.

"This sister of whom I am to speak to you was a friend of mine," began Vasserot. "She was an angel on earth; I must break to you the intelligence that she is now an angel in heaven."

There was silence for a moment or two; the sisters exchanged glances. "We feared that she was dead," said Miss Dorcas at last. "You needn't be afraid, sir, to speak of her; it is so long since she left us that she is more like a dear memory to us than anything else."

"It is my desire to speak of her freely," exclaimed Vasserot, spreading out his hands. "I knew her—and I knew her husband. It is my desire to speak also freely of him, even if I wound you. He was despicable—he was depraved—he knew not the value of the prize he had won."

"It was the bitterest thing that ever happened to us when she ran away with Michael Doran," said Miss Dorcas, in a low tone. "We did not know anything about it; he had met her, it seemed, at another house. She was almost a child—the baby of the family. We only knew all about it when we had a letter telling us she was married, and was going abroad that day. It was then for the first time that we heard even what her married name was."

"This man—this Michael Doran—was of a nature

the most imbecile," said Vasserot. "Figure to yourselves, ladies, a man handsome and gifted, and a man with a voice that could have moved thousands, and charmed little gold pieces out of them, and big gold pieces also. Then figure to yourselves, ladies, that imbecile throwing it all away—pouf!—just like that. Figure to yourselves his drowning that voice, and screaming that voice hoarse and dry with passion—in a word, taking no care of that voice that must have been one of the most beautiful in the world. He brought that voice to me—too late for me to save it—years too late. I could have saved it, and I could have saved him perhaps, had he but come a little time earlier."

"What has become of him?" asked Miss Betsy, after another pause.

"He is dead," replied Vasserot, simply. "He who might have done great things did little ones instead—mean little ones—and died meanly. There is an end of him; I, who was his friend, say it without regret. But, ladies,"—Vasserot slowly wagged a forefinger before his face—"ladies with tender hearts and kind eyes—ladies who loved the little sister who ran away—just for love—there is something else!"

They waited in a tense silence, watching him. The hand of Miss Betsy had stolen to the hand of Miss Dorcas, and was gripping it.

"Great things are not always lost—and the great thing of Michael Doran was his voice—and that is saved. Saved, ladies—by Gustave Vasserot! On my knees, with my eyes on Heaven, I thank the good God for it every night of my life!"

The passion that shook him, and the deep earnest-

ness, were tremendous; he vibrated with them. He paused now to fling back the hair from his face; and then went on again, more strongly even than before.

"In the days that must have been bright and happy for the little Ruth—the days when the man loved her—a child was born to them."

He paused again to note the effect of his words; in the tense silence of the room it seemed to him that each sister caught her breath, and held it.

"A little tiny boy—a boy with dark hair and eyes that made women turn to look at him in the streets—and a mouth tender and sensitive like a girl. I have much pity for that child, even from the first; there seems to be so little hope that that child can ever be what the little mother dreams he may be. In my heart I weep for that child when I think of all that may happen to him. He is a boy grown when first I see him; I shrug my shoulders, and say that it is no business of mine; he has a father and a little mother, and I have my own life and my own troubles. No—it shall be no affair of mine."

The sisters made no attempt to ask any questions; they seemed fascinated by this man, who was laying out before them that part of the story of which they had never dreamed. They had thought of the little sister wandering about; they had wondered and wept a little when the letters had ceased, and when they heard no more from her. But of a child?—in their simple hearts they had not thought of that possibility.

"But one day, when the boy had grown to something a little bigger and a little older, it chanced that I heard him warbling to himself—just as a child

might warble—breathing out a melody, in ignorance of what it meant, or of any value there might be in it. I listened; a thought had suddenly flashed itself upon me. I seemed to see, as in a blurred picture, the once golden voice of the father; I saw, as in a picture clear as crystal, the bright, pure voice in the boy. There had been no time for the boy to learn the pretty little art of the lifting of wine cups; there had been no occasion for the boy to scream at everything and anything that displeased his little soul. No—no; the golden voice lay there—hidden away; and no longer did I say to myself that this was no affair of mine and that I must not disturb myself over it. In silence and secretly I stole the boy away from the father that cared nothing for him, and I taught the boy of the golden voice—and I drew it all out of him—all the magic quality of it—all the timbre—all the rare softness and yet the strength—like this."

Palms upward, and with fingers bent, he moved his hands slowly through the air toward himself, as though drawing out some fine wires to their utmost. The little ladies watched him, fascinated and breathless.

"Ladies of tender hearts and gentle sympathies—I—Gustave Vasserot—have made and created the most wonderful voice—the purest tenor—that the world will ever hear. I, Gustave Vasserot, say it in the teeth of the world! I know it; and it issues itself, ladies, from the lips of a boy so beautiful—so wondrous—that he will turn the hearts and the heads of all that ever hear him. I, Gustave Vasserot, know it!"

He had reached that point in his discourse to which

he had brilliantly led up; he paused now, and drummed his fingers on the table, and looked about him. The little ladies drew long breaths, and looked with wonder at the man who could do these things out in the great world of which they knew nothing, and he so much. After a moment or two he got up from his chair and went to the table; poured out some brandy into the Major's glass, and drank it off.

"Forgive me that I take this for myself, with no apologies," he said, with a smile. "It is that I am excited; it is a solemn truth, ladies, that I am on the verge of tears. I come of a nation that in excitement is ever on the verge of tears; and that has made that nation a great one. Now, listen to me. Listen to me with your eyes, and with your ears, and with your lips—lips that have kissed the dead little mother of the living boy with the voice of gold. Listen, ladies, and hear a tale that shall break your gentle hearts—and yet only for a moment—and shall break them gently. This boy of the divine face and the voice of gold—the voice of gold that I, Gustave Vasserot, have made for him—this Israfel whose heart-strings are a lute, and who sings better than the angels—this boy is starving in a garret. The boy of the little sister who ran away—just for love!"

The amazing man had worked himself up to such a pitch of excitement that he was no longer merely on the verge of tears. With a sudden passionate gesture, and with a strange working of his ugly face, he dropped that face into his hands, and burst into tears.

With an exclamation Miss Dorcas rose, and with her Miss Betsy. They stood there looking at the man helplessly; they had never seen a man weep

before. Coming on the top of such a tale as he had told, with such a reviving of old memories, it stirred them as they had scarcely ever been stirred. Miss Betsy, in particular, stood there trembling, and half stretching out hands toward the dark, shaggy head of the man, as though she would have comforted him. Stella's eyes were full of tears, and her lips were quivering.

And then suddenly Vasserot looked up, and wiped away the traces of tears with his fingers; stood up, and slapped his chest, and smiled.

"See—it is over—it is done with. For a moment my emotion mastered me; I thought of the boy—and for a moment I lost myself. It shall not be so with me again, ladies, I promise you. The word of Gustave Vasserot on that, ladies."

"All that you have told us, Mr. Vasserot," said Miss Doreas, "has come as so much of a shock and a surprise that we scarcely know what to say. I am sure that on behalf of my sister and myself we thank you very much for the trouble you have taken in coming to us, and I am sure also that we are grateful to you for your kindness to the boy. In the name, too, of our dear dead sister we thank you for that."

"Dear ladies—it is in the name of the dear dead sister that I come to you to-night—to plead with you," said Vasserot, earnestly. "I knew her, and in friendship I loved her; this heart of mine aches now when I think of her. This heart of mine aches also when I think of the boy; because the little mother sleeps in her grave in a far-off country—and the troubles of the little mother are for ever ended. This boy has all his troubles yet before him."

"What do you wish us to do?" asked Miss Betsy in perplexity.

"Listen to me," exclaimed Vasserot, beating one hand softly on the other to emphasize his words. "I have done all for this boy; I have worked for him; I have starved for him. No—you are not to thank me for that—because it was not all for love of him. There is in my nature a side that is sordid; I cannot help it; I am as God made me. In my way I am a very great artist; I have surprised myself at times to discover how great an artist I am. Yet always the side that is sordid creeps up. At the moment I am destitute—I starve. But the time is coming when I shall no longer starve, and when the boy will not longer starve. The voice of gold must be heard; it shall be heard. And then"—he shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his hands and smiled—"then nothing will matter. Once the voice is heard even the foolish public in this dull city will wake itself up and will gape and stare, and will listen; and they will pour gold over the boy and over the good Gustave Vasserot—and all will be very well with us. It is but the opportunity that is wanting."

"I begin to understand, I think," murmured Miss Dorcas.

"Of course you begin to understand, dear lady; your gentle heart gives you understanding. Figure to yourself that at the moment this boy is poor and ill-clad, and that he has no food. He wants gentle people about him—soft voices—the soothing touch of the hands of those who knew and loved his little mother in the days that are gone. All these it is in your power to give him—and then—the reward so

enormous! You will bask in the sunshine that is his, and in the glory that shall be his; people will say of you—‘Look you, those are the good ladies who went to him in his adversity, and lifted him up and helped him, and saved the greatest voice in all the world. Let us,’ they will say, ‘kiss their dear hands; let us throw roses at their dear feet.’”

“You mean that he should come and stay—here?” asked Miss Dorcas a little faintly.

“I do, madam; that is my wish; that is almost my demand. For myself—nothing; it is to save him, and to save his voice of gold. Ah, ladies”—he looked at them, and smiled, and spread out his hands—“but you will love him. He is a thing so delicate, so fine, and so beautiful, that you cannot but love him. He will charm your hearts, just as he will charm your ears; and at night, in your gentle prayers, you will bless the good Gustave Vasserot for what he has done, and will waft his name toward Heaven. It is absurd that you should fail to love him.”

“You say that he has no friends?” asked Miss Betsy.

“None but myself. It was with difficulty that in our great extremity I discovered from him your names and the place in which you lived. For he is proud, this boy—oh, yes—with a very great pride. He will not humble himself; it is left for me to do that on his account.”

There was a pause, during which the sisters looked at each other; it was Miss Dorcas who spoke, but Miss Betsy nodded slowly from time to time, as though endorsing all that she said.

“In a sense, of course, he belongs to us. We are

his aunts, and there is no one else to look after him. Poor Ruth would have wished that; she would have been glad to know that the boy was safe. We must not forget that. Of course he must come to us; he has the right."

"Ladies, you are wonderful; you are of a greatness that melts me," murmured Vasserot. "I am again near to tears. I will not trust myself to speak further; the boy shall thank you himself. Ah—and how he will thank you, that boy; with his eyes, and with his lips, and with the soul of him. I go straight to him now to tell him—to prepare him; to-morrow I bring him to you. Where is my hat?"

He looked wildly all round the room; descried the hat in a corner where he had flung it on entering, and darted swiftly upon it. Clasping it with one hand to his breast, he bowed to the ladies, and so stood for a moment in silence. He had turned, and was making for the door, when he stopped, and then, wheeling about, came slowly back again, without looking at them.

"There is a little thing—and yet a monstrous thing," he said. "I do not ask it for myself; it is always for the boy. But we must eat, and there is a lodging to pay to an extortionate scoundrel before we can leave. I ask boldly, because already, ladies, I know you, and I esteem and love you." A wonderful smile spread over his face; with an air of charming frankness he put his request. "A little money?"

Instantly Miss Dorcas went out of the room; in a few moments, during which Vasserot had been look-

ing at the ceiling and humming softly to himself, she returned with a purse in her hand.

"I will ask you for five little pounds—no less and no more," said Vasserot. "Observe my frankness; it is because I love and esteem you. Five little pounds!"

She gave him the money, and he dropped it into his pocket. He was moving again toward the door when Miss Betsy put a question to him.

"Mr. Vasserot—what is his name?"

"His name, dear lady, is Michael—the same as one of the angels. His father's name also was Michael; but his father was not the same as one of the angels; quite the reverse. I salute you, ladies—I bless you; to-morrow you shall see Michael. I will bring him to you."

He opened the door of the room, and went out swiftly into the hall; he opened the outer door and stepped out into the street. Jimmie Fielding, waiting there patiently, saw him start to run down Little Place, and was minded almost to run after him. But after a moment or two Vasserot steadied himself to a more sober gait, and marched off, whistling gaily as he went.

CHAPTER IV

IN MEMORY CORNER

GUSTAVE VASSEROT on his way back to the garret walked like one on air. The great thing had been accomplished; he had two little fluttering women as it were in his supple hands, and he felt that he could do what he liked with them. Their quiet citadel had been stormed and entered; the rest was easy. He jingled the five golden coins in his pocket as he walked; light-heartedly he hummed a little air.

Coming near to his lodging, he stopped at a little dingy *café*, where he was obviously known, and exchanged a few words with the smiling proprietress and her husband behind the bar. One of the golden sovereigns was tendered, and in exchange he received quite a substantial lot of silver, a long-necked bottle of white wine, and a little square packet of tobacco and some cigarette papers.

"It is the only tobacco worthy of the name—this tobacco of Lyons. It has a fine flavor, this tobacco," said he.

He came out with his purchases, and made his way up the many stairs to the garret. He opened the door softly and looked in. The boy was seated by the table, with his head on his arms, fast asleep; at the other end of the same table the woman was

seated, with a dingy pack of cards spread out before her, apparently telling her own fortune. The fortune was apparently not all she could have wished; she was shaking her head dismally over the cards before her.

She looked up as Vasserot entered—fixing her eyes upon him with a dull look, half expectant and half fearful. Seeing in his expression a new look of good temper, her own face brightened a little.

“So the little one is asleep—eh?” said Vasserot. “Presently we will wake him; there is news for him. There is news for us all, if we come to that. And put away those things,” he added impatiently, as he set down the bottle of wine. “What fortune is likely to come to such as you? If it comes at all it will come to you through me—as all other good things have come to you. Put them away.”

This was said in a subdued tone, with glances at the boy; he evidently did not wish to wake him.

“They don’t seem to come right no’ow,” said the woman, in a whisper, as she swept the cards together and wrapped them in an old piece of newspaper and put them into her pocket. “They’re all jumbled up. There’s a fair lidy an’ a dark gent; an’ I’m goin’ to ‘ave a change very soon—though whether it’s fer the better—”

“We shall all have a change; we arrange ourselves differently with very great quickness, I do assure you. Come now—glasses!”

From a cupboard the woman got out two odd glasses and put them on the table; then drew back, watching him.

“It is well that you have put out but two,” said

Vasserot, calmly, as he took the paper wrappings off the bottle. "This is a wine of a delicacy that could not appeal to you, to whom thick beer and such nauseous stuff is more to the liking. But perhaps we shall even be able to provide you with that, if you are good, and if you remember always what Gustave Vasserot tells you. Now, my little one"—he laid a hand softly on the boy's shoulder, and gently shook him—"wake yourself; it is your Gustave that calls, and he has great news for you. Wake yourself!"

The boy started upright, staring in a bewildered way about him, and blinking his eyelids. "Hullo!" he exclaimed, "I must have dropped off. Everything was so quiet, and I'm tired out. How long have you been back, Gustave?"

"I have but just returned," replied the other. "I have returned as it were on the wings of the wind; my heart is light; I speak as a boy. But first, before I tell you anything—before I break to you the great news of the success that has attended me—before all that we will take a little of this wine, to drink to the health and to the success and to the prosperity of the most noble ladies that this dull city of London holds in its heart to-night." He broke off, to snap out impatiently at the woman—"Imbecile! what is the use of a bottle and glasses if there be not a corkscrew?"

"Sorry," said the woman, and hurried across the room to get one.

"You don't mean to say that you've found them?" asked the boy.

"I mean to say nothing—at the moment," said Vasserot, giving his whole attention to a nice ad-

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justment of the corkscrew. "This is a wine of a delicacy and a flavor that is wonderful; yet is it a wine that has no bad effects and mounts not to the head. There!"—as he poured out the wine carefully into the two glasses—"taste—and drink to the health of the noble ladies whom I have seen and saluted this evening."

Michael gulped down the wine hurriedly, with his eyes always on Vasserot; he set down the empty glass and spoke impatiently.

"But I want to know all about it."

"A wine of this quality and flavor is wasted upon such as you," exclaimed Vasserot, gently sipping at his glass. "As well give it to Bathsheba, who has no palate, and no taste, and no music in her soul. I am surprised at you, little master; you should know better. Above all, you should have patience with your Vasserot, who does all things always for your good."

The boy laughed and shrugged his shoulders—a trick he had caught from the older man. "Have your own way, Gustave," he said. "You always take your own time about telling things and you always work up for a great effect. I will be patient."

"I work for a great effect in all things," exclaimed the other, setting down his glass. "With me it is always the artist—always the man who does things in a fashion that is artistic. I do not put on my hat as other men put on theirs; nor do I walk as others walk. It is in my nature and in the very blood of me to be an artist. But for that, it is more than probable that I should not have come so near to starvation; had I had a soul that was wholly sordid I should

have been a great man in quite another direction. But always the world would have heard of me."

"I'm quite sure of it," said the boy.

"If in the past, little master," went on Vasserot, in a gentler tone, "I have been at any time impatient with you—that must all be forgotten and forgiven now. I have been faithful to you—to your voice—and to myself; I, Gustave Vasserot, say it, and will not be denied. And, see now"—he spread out his right hand and shook it in the air—"see now the result of the faithfulness of your Gustave. Our troubles are ended; I to-night, at much pain and expense of explanation, entreaty and what not, have secured for you a haven. You shall rest yourself, little master; you shall lie softly in sweet-scented linen; the tender hands of women shall soothe you. And I—Gustave Vasserot, the artist and the magician—have done this thing!"

"You've found them?" asked the boy, in a whisper.

"Sit yourself—and listen," said Vasserot, drawing up a chair to the table and sitting down, and signing to the boy to do likewise. "And you, imbecile—do not madden me by standing there and staring with your mouth open; it irritates me beyond expression. Get you to bed. Draw the curtain and disrobe yourself, and get you to bed."

"I'm sorry," said the woman, recovering herself with a start. "I wasn't thinking."

"I've never known you to think, save only when you had a saucepan in your hand and a fire before you. All are great in their way, and you are greater in that. You are forgiven, my Bathsheba—but let

it not occur again. Draw the curtain—disrobe yourself—and sleep."

The woman drew the curtain along the string which supported it, so as to hide the bed; and thereafter vague movements of the curtain, and bulgings of it, suggested that she was undressing in that decent seclusion. Vasserot turned now to the boy.

"I have succeeded. This morning, and even this afternoon, I was in despair; I confess now that before me stood the end of things. I was in a mood to close up the window and the chimney and the crack beneath the door, and, in the fashion that was born, I think, in my country, to light a little charcoal—and so send us all to sleep. Forgive me, little master, that that thought should have come to me, but figure to yourself my despair."

"You couldn't have been in blacker depths than I was," answered the other. "Good old Gustave; you're always in heaven one minute and in the other place the next. Get on with your story."

"Little master—there are moments when you understand me," said Vasserot, complacently. "It is difficult to understand me, but it happens sometimes that you accomplish it. Now—to be brief; for after all this big thing may be stated in a few little words. And with Vasserot to do the thing, and to accomplish it, and to set it straight, it was, after all, a simple matter. The good aunts live; they are melted at the thought of you; they wait with open arms and tear-dimmed eyes and hearts fluttering in their gentle bosoms—for you. I, Gustave Vasserot, have done this thing; therefore it is not so very wonderful after all."

"But it is wonderful," exclaimed the boy. "For you to dig out these people, and to get them to help me . . . how in the world did you manage it?"

"They live in a little house, in a little place, and in a little world of their own. I swept in upon them; I carried them by storm. I painted a picture of the boy with the voice of gold who was starving. I did not hesitate to let them understand that I also was starving on his account. I shook them as leaves are shaken in the wind; I caused them to tremble; before I left them I saw the tears spring to their eyes. To end it all—you go to-morrow to be presented to them; you remain with them in the little house in which I have talked with them. The thing is accomplished."

He poured himself out another glass of wine, and in his excitement this time drank it at a draught.

"What are they like? Tell me all about them," said the boy, eagerly. "It'll be good to get with decent people again; to have a chance to breathe—and to sing. All sorts of memories of them are being stirred—memories of what my mother has told me of them. Tell me all about them."

Vasserot was just about to begin his recital when there was a mysterious bumping sound from the direction of the bed, and a new bulging of the curtain. And then a droning, drowsy voice began to recite a prayer.

"She kneels—and she prays," whispered Vasserot, as the droning voice went softly on. "It is well that she kneels and that she prays—even though it happens that she does not know what the words really mean; it is a good habit. When, little master," he

whispered more impressively, as he leaned across the table, with an eye upon the curtain which shrouded the bed, "when I married Bathsheba she was even more soulless than you see her now. I did not love her; but she adored me. She was a serving-maid in a boarding-house; and I had no money, and she had a little in what you call your Post Office. I needed money very sorely, as I have always needed it; she was a cook adorable, though she knew it not, and of an ugliness you have yourself seen. The first syllable of her absurd name she pronounced as though she spoke of washing herself—but that is no matter. I am glad, as I have said, that she kneels and prays; it is a good quality."

He went on to tell of all he had done. Of his going to that little house; of his meeting with the little ladies, and of his soft persuasion of them—that business which had been no matter of persuading at all. He wildly exaggerated the impression he had made; he wildly exaggerated the rotundity of the Major, and the awe with which the Major had looked upon him, and the precipitancy with which the Major had fled from him. And he dwelt much upon the eagerness with which the little ladies looked forward to the coming of the son of their dead sister.

"I take you to them to-morrow. After that, you must leave all to your Gustave." These were his final words in relating the story.

"I'm glad it's not just the two old ladies," was the boy's comment on the story. "You say the girl is pretty?"

"The adopted niece is adorable—of a prettiness that melts the heart," said Gustave. "Not the style

of girl that compels my admiration, but still adorable. In a word, it is a pleasant household, as you shall discover."

"But what are you going to do, Gustave?" asked Michael. "If you have schemes in your head for helping me, what is the use of burying me away with these people?"

"Oh—impatient one!—oh!—ungrateful! Is it possible that you imagine that I have not taken count of things, and do not understand what is clearly in my brain? Does it not seem to you that you cannot do without me?"

"Well—I know that," said the other.

"As you cannot do without me, so I must be near you. But these things do not happen all at once. We cannot go to this little house and say to these gentle ladies—'We must be together; we must lodge ourselves with you.' The gentle ladies would be alarmed. No, little master; we arrive ourselves gradually. To-morrow you will go, and I leave you with regret; a little later I find it is impossible for me to continue to help you unless I am with you. Therefore I arrive myself. It is a thing to be arranged—but so arranged as not to alarm the little ladies. You must leave it all to your Gustave."

Michael got up, and began to pace about the room; when he turned to the other man he spoke always in that subdued tone, for fear of disturbing the sleeping woman. "Look here," he said at last, "I want to be sure of what you're going to do."

"I am not yet sure myself," answered the other, with a smile.

"It's all very well for us to get them to help us;

God knows we need help badly. But they seem to have lived, from what you tell me, right out of the world; I can't for the life of me understand how you induced them to consent to take me at all."

Vasserot very slowly ripped open the little square packet of tobacco and selected a cigarette paper; rolled a cigarette with incredible swiftness and lighted it, blowing out clouds of villainous-smelling smoke. "I despair of making you understand anything about it," he said at last. "To-night I say no more; the thing is accomplished, and you have but to do all that I ask."

"I may not do all that you ask," answered Michael. "If these ladies are good to me, and help me, it would be something of a crying shame if you descended on them and robbed them—even for the sake of my voice."

Vasserot blew another cloud of smoke up toward the ceiling; his eyes narrowed. "You use ugly words, little master—but to-night I am in a good mood, and so I pass them over. I rob no one; all that I take I pay back again—in ten—in a hundred measures. I will not argue with you to-night; you need sleep. Leave me, I beg."

The boy got to the door of the ante-room in which he slept; stood there for a moment irresolutely, and then came back to where the big man sat at the table smoking.

"I say, old Gustave," said Michael, slowly, "I wouldn't wound you for the world."

"It is well; say no more about it."

"And so I ask your pardon. I only wanted you to understand that, above all else, I want to run

straight. The little mother, whom I loved and worshipped, was always afraid of that; she knew the bad strain I had in me. God knows I want to sing; all the music is here within me, and I long to get it out. I love my art, not for what it'll bring me, but just because my art is me—my very life."

"Spoken like a good and excellent child," said Vasserot. "You shall leave all the rest to Gustave; he asks no more than that you should sing. And you shall go straight—so that the little mother, who is an angel in heaven, may never be grieved. Now, good-night; dream of pleasant things; to-morrow we begin to live."

The boy went to his room; and Vasserot sat for a long time, smoking his villainous tobacco and blowing clouds of smoke. Presently he got up, and walked to the window, and threw it open; he leaned there, looking out over the roofs and down into the streets.

"Rob them—eh?" he said softly to the night at last. "It is an ugly word, but there may be a little speck of truth in it. Michael shall sing, and the little ladies shall pay; Gustave Vasserot will see to that. It will be sufficient that they see him, and that they hear him; the rest is easy. The little mother in heaven gave to the boy a conscience which his father never possessed, and that is a pity. But the conscience will disappear—ah, yes—it will disappear."

He smoked another cigarette, and finally blew out the candle and went to bed. And dreamed of applauding crowds, and much money, and ease and luxury, what time the little ladies had been left far behind and forgotten.

And the next morning saw Little Place, Hampstead, in a state of commotion. Not at No. 3 alone, but at two other houses. It is a very literal fact that the Major, for almost the first time in his life, had found himself unable to sleep, for thinking of that strange man who had bounced in upon the Misses Teakle. The Major was consumed with curiosity; he could scarcely eat his breakfast next morning for thinking about it. At last, as a preliminary step, he sent his man down with his compliments, and Major Pennykid would like to know if the Misses Teakle are quite well."

The exasperating answer came back that "the Misses Teakle thanked Major Pennykid, and were in the very best of health."

The Major swore at his man for eight minutes by the clock for not bringing a better answer, and presently, at a wholly unprecedented hour, rang the bell at No. 3, and asked to see Miss Teakle. There was more exasperation in store for the Major; for in the drawing-room, also waiting to see Miss Teakle, was Flora Fielding.

"Good-morning," said the Major a little sharply. "I just looked in—early morning call, you know, but then I always was an early bird—to find out if that man startled our friends at all last night. I didn't like the look of the fellow."

"That is exactly my errand," said Mrs. Fielding; and added more honestly, "I came to see if I could find out what all the business was."

At that moment Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy entered the room, and stood expectantly looking at their visitors.

"My dears, we were so alarmed about you last night—" began Mrs. Fielding.

"That I felt it only right to come in this morning and see if everything was all right. I didn't like the look of that man, and I could see that he didn't like the look of me; I was too straightforward with him." Thus the Major, with much wagging of his head.

"It is extremely kind of you, Mrs. Fielding—and extremely kind of you, Major Pennykid," said Miss Dorcas. "But there was nothing in the least to be alarmed about, I assure you."

"But—but—we left here last night a most deplorable-looking foreigner, of a threatening aspect," stuttered the Major. "I couldn't sleep for thinking of him."

"The gentleman brought us news—just as you heard him say," said Miss Betsy. "News about our dear, dead sister. It appears that she left a son; and that son, through no fault of his own, has fallen upon evil days. He is coming to—to visit us."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Major. "And how old is this son?"

"Something over twenty, I believe," said Miss Dorcas. "And now, as we are really very busy making preparations for him, I'm afraid that we must excuse ourselves." Both sisters smiled faintly, blushing a little at what seemed almost to be rudeness.

"Well, I'm so glad that there was nothing alarming, and no bad news," said Mrs. Fielding. "That's why I always say that the mere sight of a telegraph boy always makes me feel cold down the back. Good-bye, my dears, and whatever you do, don't over-exert yourselves."

The Major also made his farewells, with much shaking of the head, and many suggestions as to the necessity, in the event of difficulties arising, of sending for a man and a soldier who did not live a hundred miles away. And then the little ladies, who had hurriedly dropped pinned-up skirts on the announcement of visitors, pinned them up again, and went back to work.

Fortunately it was a roomy house, and in addition to Stella's room there was a spare room. There always had been a spare room—kept in exact and proper order for a guest who never came. There had been a spare room in the time of their parents, and the Misses Teakle would as soon have thought of doing without their drawing-room as of doing without that particular chamber. Although it was already speckless, it behooved the sisters to do a great deal to it, and to urge Priscilla to do a great deal more.

They had no notion when Michael would arrive; they had only had that vague word "to-morrow"—which was, of course, to-day—from Vasserot. So that they started and trembled at every ring of the bell, and were in a constant state of flutter all day long. And even when the boy did arrive, he came unexpectedly, with no rattle of cab wheels; he had dismissed the cab at the end of Little Place, and had walked down, with Vasserot carrying a bag. It was late, and the lamps had been lighted, and the little ladies sat with folded hands, and for once attempted no work. This was a great and wonderful occasion, and it would only have meant a dropping of stitches had they tried to work at all.

Gustave Vasserot seemed to fill the tiny hall when

he entered it with a masterful stride and dropped the bag. Michael Doran came in a little doubtfully behind him, and stood there looking about him; his usually pale face was flushed with excitement, and his eyes were unnaturally bright. As the door of the little drawing-room was thrown open, Vasserot strode in, and, standing with his legs wide apart and one arm thrown out toward the hall, cried out:

“See—I bring him! Yesterday, in this room, I told you that he should come to you, and Gustave Vasserot never breaks a promise. He is here! Enter, little master!”

It was a strange introduction. The boy came in a little shyly; saw nothing more alarming than two elderly ladies with sweet faces, and one fair young girl who looked at him curiously; she was exquisitely near his own age, and he felt instantly drawn toward her. A smile broke over his face, and he went toward them with his pretty deferential bow, and took first the hand of Miss Dorcas.

“Don’t be frightened by Gustave,” he said, with a little natural laugh. “Gustave is always like that; he can’t help it. And forgive me that I don’t know your name; I only remember that one was Miss Betsy, and the other—what was it?”

It was so charmingly done, and the boy’s smile was so natural and easy, that they capitulated to him at once. And it was wonderful, too, that he should take the hand of Miss Dorcas as it was offered to him, and should lower his dark head and put the hand to his lips.

“I am Miss Dorcas,” she said, flushing a little. “Aunt Dorcas to you, of course.”

"Then this is Aunt Betsy," said Michael, turning to her and going through the same ceremony. "And this?" He gently indicated Stella, who was standing looking at him.

"This I think you will have to call Cousin Stella, although she is not really related to you," said Miss Betsy. "All that we can explain presently. Let me say first how glad we are to see you, Michael—if only for the sake of your dear mother, who was our baby sister years and years ago."

"Did I not tell you, little master, how matters would arrange themselves?" cried Vasserot, flinging out his arms. "Did I not tell you all that awaited you—tender hearts, breaking with love for you—arms yearning to clasp you—"

To the amazement of every one the boy swung round on Vasserot almost fiercely. "Gustave—be quiet! This is no time for heroics; I had almost said it was no time for you. These ladies belong to me and I to them. I understand, and they understand, and I know that we shall be good friends."

Vasserot raised his arms toward the ceiling and shook his head. "It is the ingratitude of youth," he exclaimed. "It is I, Gustave Vasserot, that have done this thing; and he tells me to be silent. I say no more; I am finished."

He seated himself in a corner of the room and folded his arms; and so in a manner obliterated himself. Michael turned with a smile to the sisters.

"I beg your pardon that I should have seemed hasty," he said, and they noticed that he had a little half-foreign air that was delightful, and that matched

well his strange black and white beauty. "But you see I know the good Gustave, and while I love him I find him sometimes tiresome. And there is so much I have to say to you—more than I thought I should have to say to you at all." He looked round the room with curious wide-open eyes. "You see—I have been in this place before."

They looked at him without answering; even Vasserot leaned forward and watched him as he went on.

"When first I came here to-night, and saw the little line of houses, and the trees, and even the railings—I remembered." His face was inspired, and his voice had sunk to a clear whisper.

"What did you remember?" asked Miss Betsy, softly.

"I remembered all that my mother had told me about it. I think I could walk blindfold through this house. I remember once sitting on a terrace in the moonlight, outside a great place where a band was playing, and men and women in evening dress were passing backwards and forwards. My father was inside the building, and I knew that he was losing a great deal of money. And while we sat there—my mother and I—she talked to me about this place. That was the first of many times. Always when she was sick and sorry and afraid she talked of this place where she had lived, and where she had been very happy. It is wonderful."

"Did I not tell you of the little mother who had always a memory for the sisters with tender hearts in the little quiet house in London?" exclaimed Vas-

serot, bringing himself again into the picture. But no one took any notice of him.

"She told me of the little, tiny, quiet street that was closed in at one end; the little narrow houses with the green doors; she told me of this room. There are things here that she described to me—that cabinet—and that table over there—and that old piano, with the silken front drawn together in a knot in the center. Yes—I have been here before—with my mother in dreams."

"How did she speak of it—and of us?" asked Miss Betsy, softly. And the strange thing was that, in the wonder of looking at him and of listening to him, they were all standing—save Vasserot in the corner—just as they had been when Michael entered the room.

"She said the place was full of memories," said the boy. "When we have sat, on hot and breathless moonlight nights, in far-off continental cities, she has often said to me—'Come, dearest, let us go far away; come back with me to Memory Corner!' That was what she called it, and at the last I think she was only happy when in her dreams she came back here with me. And it almost seems to me that she must be here with me to-night."

Vasserot rose from his corner and came into the center of the room. "It does not often happen to me that I am forgotten," he said. "But I understand that it is for you, my little Michael, to arrange yourself with these good ladies; therefore I take my leave."

"I think that will be best," answered the boy, without looking at him. "I am not ungrateful, but

to-night I don't think that I want you. Come to me another time."

With a wave of his hand, and still without looking at him, the boy seemed to dismiss the other man. And Vasserot, with a shrug of the shoulders, went out into the hall; **they heard the outer door slam as he went away.**

CHAPTER V

A MAN WITH A HEART

FOR three days there had been no callers at No. 3, Little Place, Hampstead, and however much speculation may have been at work, nothing was definitely known concerning the mysterious youth who was known to be living there. The Major had turned his head as he walked past the house, and had deliberately tried, in defiance of all the canons of good behavior in Little Place, to stare in at the window, but he had seen nothing. On one occasion he had seen Michael Doran's back when he was walking briskly away from the house side by side with Stella; but the legs of the Major not being so long nor so young as those of the couple in front of him, and as it would have been most undignified for him to call to them, he had had to watch them disappear together in the distance.

Flora Fielding had called, on an excuse, but had not seen the boy, although she had waited as long as she decently could. Also she had discussed the unknown one with Jimmie one evening, and indeed each evening; Jimmie seemed to wish to know quite a great deal about him—sitting meanwhile with hunched shoulders, brooding over a pipe. But Mrs.

Fielding knew nothing, save that the boy had arrived and was in the house.

The house itself had been stirred to its depths. The coming of Michael had been so sudden; the fact that he was actually there—a definite, living part of the establishment—was a fact they had not yet grown used to. He was very silent at first, as might be expected; but the strange, quiet gentleness of him, broken now and then by a little passionate outburst that was like a sudden storm with sunshine to follow it—all attracted them in an extraordinary degree. He had little, bright, quick, half-foreign ways of expressing himself; little gestures that were all picturesque and sometimes amusing. Also, had they but known it, he had about him the appeal his father had had always to women.

It was curious that he did not sing. Once or twice, it is true, Miss Dorcas or Miss Betsy, lingering for a moment on a landing, would hear a mere breath of sound coming from his room, and would pause for a moment, in the expectation of hearing more. And then the sound would cease, and they would go away. For the most part he seemed to desire rest and peace; he spent much of the first day stretched at full length on the couch in the little drawing-room, reading, or chatting with any one of the three that happened to be in the room. There were so many things to talk about—so many memories of the little mother who lay sleeping in a foreign grave; so much that he had seen and heard in that happy-go-lucky, rambling life of his.

It was on that second evening, when he lay stretched on the couch, with the little ladies working,

and Stella with idle hands, that Michael nodded toward the piano and spoke to the girl.

“Don’t you ever sing things, Cousin Stella?”

It had been arranged, even so early as breakfast-time that day, that he was always to call her Cousin Stella; though Stella had not yet quite got out of the habit of blushing when she heard it.

“A little—sometimes,” answered the girl.

“Sing to me now,” he said a little imperiously. He dropped the book he had been looking at, and crossed his hands behind his dark head and closed his eyes.

“Yes, sing to us, my dear,” said Miss Betsy, without looking up.

The girl sang some simple thing which she knew by heart; and while she sang Michael lay perfectly still, without moving. When the last note of it had died away he opened his eyes and turned them slowly toward her; she sat as if awaiting judgment.

“It is very nice—quite pretty,” he said. “You sing like a little bird that does not trouble how it sings. Yes, it is very pretty.”

“Your friend who came here called me a little canary,” said Stella, with a little laugh.

The boy smiled, showing his small white teeth. “That is so like Vasserot; that is exactly what he would say.”

“But he said my singing was all wrong,” said the girl.

“That is also exactly what he would say,” said Michael, calmly. “And, mark you,” he added, sitting up and speaking with deep seriousness, “Vasserot was right; Vasserot is always right about those matters. To be taught by Vasserot is the highest

and the finest thing that can happen to you; but he gives you a very bad time. There are moments when you wonder if it would be wiser to kill Vasserot or to kill yourself."

"Mr. Vasserot said a great deal about your voice, Michael," said Miss Betsy.

"He was quite enthusiastic about it," said Miss Dorcas. "Do you sing?"

The boy looked at her for a moment—a long look that was half-pitying, half-surprised, and wholly tender. "A little," he said.

"Won't you sing something to us now?" asked Miss Betsy, just by way of saying something polite.

Michael turned over on his back again on the couch and resumed his former attitude. "Not tonight, if you will excuse me; I am not in the mood. Besides, I am not allowed to sing unless the good Gustave is with me; he does not permit anyone else to play for me. And I am always obedient to Gustave."

When the time came for Stella to retire, the boy took her hand for a moment, and, after performing that ceremony of putting his lips to it, retained the hand, looking at her whimsically.

"Did I hurt you when I spoke about your music?" he asked.

"Oh, no; I know that I don't sing as people you must have heard sing," she answered, with a blush. "Perhaps some day I shall be able to hear you sing—Cousin Michael?"

"It is possible—if you are patient, and Gustave gives his consent. I am glad that I did not hurt you; it is never my wish to hurt anybody. You must

always remember that. If I say things in a great hurry they are never meant to hurt; they flash out before I have time to stop them."

"I am quite sure of that," answered Stella, moving her fingers a little as if to release her hand.

"And you are such a gentle little canary that no one would wish to hurt you, of all others in the wide world," he said, with a sudden smile, as he let her hand drop.

When she had gone softly out of the room he moved about a little restlessly—sometimes picking up a book and glancing at the cover, and putting it down again; sometimes moving an ornament. The sisters watched him covertly as they went on with their work; they still stood very much in awe of this handsome boy who had come so unexpectedly into their quiet nest. Presently he turned to them with his usual abruptness.

"There are times when I hate Gustave Vasserot," he said, with another smile. "I hate him to-night, because I feel the deprivation of that which he will not let me have."

"And what is that?" asked Miss Dorcas, looking up from her work at the slim young figure before her.

"To smoke," he said. "Vasserot forbids it; he says it is poison to me. I used to smoke when I was quite a boy; Vasserot swore terribly when he heard about it. He smokes himself, because he says that doesn't matter. He smokes the most villainous tobacco you can imagine—horrible black stuff that makes the place smell in the morning as though forty people had been smoking. He says it soothes him.

That's what makes me restless; I want something to soothe me."

He moved about the room again, and presently came back, and drew a chair in front of them and sat down.

"It is wonderful to me that you work always; your hands are never idle. Do you like that?"

Miss Betsy laughed, then straightened herself in her chair with a little tired sigh. "Of course we like it," she answered. "Besides, it's really very wrong for anyone to sit still with nothing to do. And while the hands are busy the brain can be busy too."

"And what do you think about?" he coaxed.

Miss Betsy laughed again, and glanced at her sister. "There are quite a number of things a woman thinks about that a man wouldn't understand. And now it is getting late," she added, carefully putting her work together and getting to her feet.

Michael rose also, and set his chair aside. "I only ask questions because I want to know all that I can about you," he said. "I would tell you anything about myself—just because I'm anxious for you both to like me. I've got a sort of hunger in me that people should like me."

"I don't think we shall find that to be very difficult," said Miss Betsy. "If only for your dear mother's sake—"

"And a little for my own sake too, please," he broke in. "Do you know that this has been one of the happiest days I've ever spent in all my life? It's a fact. I suppose it's just coming into this quiet place and into your quiet lives; it's like getting out of all the bustle and noise of a fair such as I have seen

on the Continent—just getting out of that into the green fields, beside a stream of water where one only heard the birds and the wind in the trees. I want to stop here and rest myself, as Gustave has it—quite a long time."

He turned away with a little gesture; there had been a little break in his voice as he said the last words. The sisters exchanged glances, and then Miss Dorcas took a step toward him and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Aunt Betsy and I have been talking about you, Michael," she said. "We want you to feel that this is your home, and at the same time we want you to feel that no restraint is put upon you. Until you have had time to look about you, and to make up your mind what your life is to be—"

"That is all arranged," he broke in quickly. "I thought Vasserot had told you?"

"Your friend said something to us that we did not quite clearly understand," she went on. "All that can be talked of later; we are not learned in such matters. At the present we are only thinking about you, and how glad we are to have you here."

"Also your Aunt Dorcas wants to say, I think," put in Miss Betsy, "that we think you would feel more independent if you possessed a little—a little money."

"That was what I was about to say," said Miss Dorcas.

"I've always left all that sort of thing to Vasserot," answered the boy, with a laugh. "It's very sweet and good of you, and one does feel a little awkward at having nothing. Some day I shall have more

than I want; only that sort of thing doesn't trouble me. Since I've been with Vasserot he has kept what he calls the sordid things away from me, and when my father was alive I used to get a sovereign if he happened to be in luck, and nothing if he didn't; it was always a scramble with us."

"We would like to do this," said Miss Dorcas, firmly. "I would not have you think that we are rich, by any means; we simply have an income sufficient for our wants. But we will make an arrangement to allow you whatever you think you ought to have."

"Oh, I don't think I ought to have anything," he answered lightly, with a laugh. "I leave it all to you; whatever you say will be right. And I assure you that I had not thought about the matter."

Long after they had retired, with special injunctions to him as to how the lamps were to be turned out and the gas jet on the staircase lowered, Michael sat there with his chin in his hands, staring straight in front of him; it was as though he saw pictures of the past going in a long procession before him.

"I'm glad," he muttered to himself at last, "that I sent Gustave away. This is what I wanted—the peace and the rest—with no thought about schemes, or wild fancies, or anything of that sort. For a little time I can forget the rush and the roar and the hurly-burly—the plenty and the starving—the mean struggles. And then Vasserot shall do what he likes with me—and I will sing again."

He got up, in his restless fashion, and began to move about; then turned abruptly and went out of the room. Only when he was half undressed did he remember the lamps; he went softly downstairs

and extinguished them, and then went back to his room, and in five minutes was fast asleep, and sleeping dreamlessly.

He had won his way so extraordinarily into all their hearts that the next morning, something to the amazement of Stella, Miss Dorcas suggested that the girl should show Cousin Michael what the Heath was like, in order that he might on any other occasion be able to explore it for himself. Stella, trembling and blushing, and a little agitated, presently went out of the house with him, nervously proud of the slim, handsome boy walking beside her, and conscious that people glanced at them as they passed, and especially at Michael.

She noticed that his clothes were well kept, but well worn; nevertheless he had an easy, graceful carriage that made what was almost his shabbiness less noticeable. When presently they came to the Heath, and seated themselves on a bench there in the autumn sunshine, Michael took off his hat and ran his fingers through his long hair, and smiled round at her.

"It is just good to be alive—good to be here," he said. "And to think that two days ago I did not even know that little Cousin Stella existed, or that she"—he bent his head smilingly toward her, and swept his hat in a bow—"was half so pretty."

"You mustn't say things like that," she protested.

"And why not?" he demanded frankly. "I suppose you know that you are pretty; and what earthly harm is there in my telling you so? I know, for instance, that I am remarkable as to looks; Vasserot has always said so—and lots of other people

besides. I'm not vain of that, but I like to think it's true. And if you, Cousin Stella, are pretty and sweet, and have a little charming voice that doesn't grate on a man (and oh, ye gods! there are quite a lot of the other sort in the world; they tear my nerves)—if you are all that, why shouldn't anyone tell you so?"

"Of course it's very nice to hear it," she confessed.

"Of course it is," said Michael, quickly. "My dear, there is only one ugly thing in all the world that I have ever had to tolerate, and that is only because I know what there is behind the ugliness. That ugly thing is Gustave Vasserot. At first it used to hurt me to look at him, but now I don't notice it. For the rest"—he looked at her with deep earnestness, compelling her eyes—"I must have soft and gentle and pretty things about me. Beauty in voices—beauty in looks—in all things. I could not bear it if I had to live with ugly things; I think it would kill me."

"I think I understand that," said Stella, slowly.

"I have had to live with ugly things—for quite a long time," he went on, without looking at her. "Poor Vasserot—who can't help it; and—and someone else. I have sat at table with them, and, although they were good to me, I have wanted to get up and shriek things at them, and then run away and hide myself. There—I have said enough. But that is why I told you that you were pretty and had a soft voice. Shall we walk a little?"

They returned in time for lunch; Miss Betsy, happening to be at the drawing-room window, saw them coming down Little Place, chatting like magpies; Stella was laughing at something the boy had said—

laughing, not demurely as usual, but showing all her pretty white teeth. And when they came in the girl had a flush on her face, and her eyes were bright, and she declared that she was ravenously hungry. Miss Betsy raised her eyebrows, but said nothing.

"And what did you find to talk about—you and Stella?" asked Miss Dorcas across the luncheon-table.

"We talked about everything under the sun, and lots of other things besides," he answered quickly. "Also we reviewed the universe, and decided exactly what sort of a world we would make of it if we had our way; there was never to be any winter, and the sun was always to shine, and beauty was to be everywhere. Wasn't that it, Cousin Stella?"

"Something like that," she answered, with a smile.

"All things come in their due season, as they are appointed," said Miss Dorcas. "We should never complain about anything in this world; all things are ordered for the best."

"One recognizes the truth of that the older one grows," said Miss Betsy, with a nod.

That evening Jimmie Fielding, who had been sitting in his usual chair in his mother's house for quite a long time without saying anything, suddenly rose to his feet and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "I've half a mind," he said to his mother, "to step in next door and see how everyone's getting on. Just a friendly call."

Jimmie's head was above the circle of light thrown by the lamp, so that Flora Fielding did not see his face or the curious deep flush upon it. "Why not?"

she murmured. "I do want to know what the new importation's like."

"I'll just look in," said Jimmie, slowly. "I shan't be long."

Hatless, he stepped round to No. 3, and rang the bell. Priscilla answered the summons, and Jimmie asked, as carelessly as he could, if Miss Dorcas was at home. The maid admitted that she was, and begged him to step in. In the lighted drawing-room Jimmie found the sisters seated side by side, working as usual. It was still early, but the curtains were drawn to shut out the autumn evening.

Jimmie's eyes wandered round the room. "Good evening," he said. "I just looked in to see how everyone was. I thought I'd just step round."

"It's very kind of you, Jimmie," said Miss Dorcas. "We're all alone, you see; Stella has gone for a stroll."

"Oh?" Jimmie plunged his hands into his pockets, and stared as Miss Betsy took up the tale.

"Yes—with her Cousin Michael. He was restless, and said that he had a headache; so we suggested—or I think it was he suggested—that they should go and get a breath of fresh air. They'll be back directly, I expect," she added, with a glance at the clock.

"Won't you sit down, Jimmie?" said Miss Dorcas.

"Thank you—I think perhaps I will," said Jimmie; and seated himself.

Jimmie sat for quite half an hour, and during that time he said very little. The sisters worked as usual, and now and then one or other of them would look up with a sigh, and with a straightening of shoulders,

and would remark that the evenings were drawing in; and Jimmie would say that he quite agreed with her. Then, after another long pause, the other sister would add that we should soon have the winter upon us now; and Jimmie would say that he was quite sure of it, and relapse into silence again. Through his mind went long thoughts—all to be summed up in the one word “Stella”; but they were thoughts not to be expressed to anyone. At that time Jimmie never seriously thought about anything else.

At last a ring at the bell, and the footsteps of Priscilla in the little hall. Then quick, eager voices, with a soft, low laugh from Stella as she ran upstairs to her room. The door opened, and Michael Doran came in.

He came in abruptly, as he did everything, with his lips slightly parted and his eyes shining. He stood still on seeing the visitor, and looked enquiringly at the sisters.

“Michael, this is Mr. Fielding.” Michael bowed quickly, and seemed to take in the big figure looming above him at a glance. “A very old friend of ours—we call him Jimmie.”

“I am pleased to meet any old friend,” exclaimed Michael, holding out his hand.

“How do you do?” said Jimmie, stolidly, as he took the hand.

Michael turned impulsively to the sisters. “It was lovely up on the Heath, as you call the place,” he said; “and we walked further than we knew. Also we talked—that I need not tell you. The good Gustave says that I talk far too much; but he forgets that there are such a lot of things always to talk

about when one is young. When I grow old"—he laughed, and swept his hair back from his forehead—"when I am gray and sober, and perhaps a little tired of things, then I shall not talk so much."

Stella came in quickly; looked at Jimmie, who instantly had eyes for no one but her, and held out her hand to him. She had not expected to find him there, and for a moment she was taken by surprise; there was a little faint air of constraint about her greeting.

"Hullo, Jimmie!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know you were here. Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing at all," he replied. "I—I just looked in."

"Jimmie has been making a call," said Miss Betsy, with unconscious irony.

"I thought there was no harm in just looking in," said Jimmie.

"We're always delighted to see you—at any time," said Miss Betsy.

There was an awkward pause. Jimmie, not knowing what else to do, seated himself gravely, and folded his arms, and looked at the ceiling. Michael threw himself on the couch and put his hands behind his head, and closed his eyes. Miss Betsy coughed, and glanced at her sister a little helplessly, and then at her work. After a moment or two the boy spoke, without opening his eyes.

"What was it that Gustave called you, Cousin Stella?"

"Little canary," murmured Stella, with a blush.

"Then sing to us, little canary," he commanded.

"It's getting a little late," protested Miss Dorcas. "I think we'd better postpone it."

"But I want her to sing to me," said Michael, with a petulant movement of one foot. "She does not sing well, but her voice pleases me; it soothes me. Just one little song—but that one little song I must have."

"Very well—just one, Stella," said Miss Dorcas.

The girl moved quickly toward the piano; Jimmie rose to assist her. "Don't you sing if you're tired," he muttered.

But she took no notice of him; she sat down at the piano and warbled the song she had sung the previous evening. When it was finished she glanced as if for commendation at Michael on the couch; listened meekly as he spoke, still with his eyes closed.

"Vasserot did well to call you little canary. Some day, if he can be persuaded, he shall teach you how to sing as singing should be done. Perhaps we shall not be able to persuade him; he does not like teaching women. And perhaps, after all, it will not be worth while, because Vasserot would make you suffer, and you would cry, and begin by hating him. No—we will let you alone."

"I think she has a very beautiful voice," broke in Jimmie, with surprising heat.

"That is because you know nothing whatever about it," said Michael. "I have suffered Vasserot, and suffered him gladly; and Vasserot knows. There are hundreds and thousands of voices just like that"—he opened his eyes and rolled over lazily, and flung out an arm toward Stella—"and all those voices please their friends, and do no harm, but—singing?—ask Vasserot!"

Presently Jimmie took his leave stolidly, shaking hands in regular order with Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy, and lastly with Stella. Stella just glanced at him as he held her hand, and that was all. In the doorway he turned to glance at Michael on the couch. "Oh—good-night," he said.

"Good-night!" murmured Michael, without looking at him.

Stella hesitated a moment, and then, greatly daring, went out after Jimmie. More greatly daring still, she closed the door of the room behind her; and so stood for a moment under the dim light in the little hall, looking at him as he fumbled with the lock of the outer door.

"I couldn't let you go like that," she whispered. "But why are you cross, Jimmie?"

"I didn't know I was cross," he whispered unhappily. "Only I don't particularly like that chap."

"Jimmie!" She looked at him with troubled eyes. "Why—he's wonderfully nice; he keeps me laughing all the time; I didn't know that I could laugh so much. He's so bright and gay; he's like a child. And oh, Jimmie, it's so good to laugh sometimes in this quiet house!"

He bent his head solemnly and kissed her, then went out into the street. In the utter dead silence of the place he stood for a moment, looking up at the hurrying clouds racing across the moon; he thought of her innocent words:

"It's so good to laugh sometimes!"

CHAPTER VI

THE VOICE OF GOLD

GUSTAVE VASSEROT sat alone in the big garret, with his long legs stretched out before him under the piano, and his feet touching the pedals; he was improvising something with seeming difficulty, for he frowned and muttered, and swore strange oaths under his breath as he hammered away at the keys.

The door opened, and the woman Bathsheba came in. She carried an untidy string bag bulging with parcels; she set this down on the table, and unpinned her hat. She glanced doubtfully at the man seated at the piano; her fingers shook a little as she replaced the pins in the hat and softly laid it on the table. Vasserot ran his fingers along the keys, and stopped, and swung round upon her.

"It has taken you a long time to bring yourself back again," he said savagely. "Did I not tell you to hasten? Or have you"—this with savage irony, as he looked at her garments—"have you been studying the modes of the moment in the shop windows?"

"I made as much 'aste as I could," she muttered. "I 'ad a lot of things to git, an' I wanted to go to the cheapest shops. It's all very well you saying you will 'ave things good; they ain't always so easy to git with the money you give me."

"Truly it is a hard life you lead, my Bathsheba. (I shall have to give you the name abominable of Mary Ann, as they used to do in the boarding-place where first we met. What spawn of the Evil One christened you Bathsheba I know not—)"

"It was mother's fancy," she answered humbly.

"Then I crave your pardon for calling her a spawn of the Evil One," he said gallantly, with a wave of his hand. "And you are forgiven for loitering so long. Only you should know well by this time that I cannot bear to be left with myself only; it is a thing unendurable. Always there must be someone for me to talk to. Now prepare the meal; I am hungry."

She hurried about to do his bidding, casting glances at him from time to time as he moved uneasily about the studio—pausing sometimes at the window to look out, and then coming toward her, in a frightening fashion, as though about to address her suddenly. But he said nothing until, with the meal actually prepared and set out upon the table, he was seated opposite her, eating with his usual rapidity. And then his announcement was a sudden one.

"Bathsheba, I go from this place to-day."

She laid down her knife and fork, and spoke in a dull voice. "I might 'ave known it was comin'," she said. "You're going to turn me adrift, I s'pose?"

He waved aside the brutality of the suggestion, and smiled at her. "Always do you use the wrong word, my little one," he said playfully. "You do but provide for yourself elsewhere, as I have been compelled to ask you to do before. There is work for me to do, and I may no longer neglect it. I leave this

place to-day; my piano has already arranged itself for storage. The men will be here in but a little time to take it away. The other things are not worth taking; they may be left. For yourself, you shall have money—a little money, lest you should be overtaken by extravagance; and then you will find for yourself a situation."

"Oh, I can easy do that," she answered, with some sort of pride. "You don't get cooks like me every day of the week. I can stop at a registry office for a day or two, I s'pose. I did think, when you married me—an' I've got me lines safe, an' it'd take more'n you to git 'em away from me—I did think I was goin' to 'ave a bit of rest, an' be a lady, an' git some love an' comfort—"

"Bathsheba," he exclaimed, bringing the flat of his hand down hard upon the table, "be not sentimental. I forbid it!" And then, as one corner of her apron went up to her eyes, he sprang from his seat, leaving his meal unfinished, and began to stride about the room. "And do not weep; it maddens me. One of these days, when things are well with us, and I prosper, you shall come back to me. So much I promise you."

"Yus—you always say that," she whimpered. "And then, d'rectly you're all right agen, I don't 'ear nothink from you; it's on'y w'en you're on yer uppers, an' want somebody cheap to cook for yer—"

"Enough—enough; I will not listen!" he cried impatiently. "The thing is accomplished. But you shall come back, when things so arrange themselves that it is possible. I hear feet upon the stairs; it is the men for the piano."

The mere removal of the piano was an exciting business; Bathsheba remembered that it always was an exciting business when anything was done to the piano. Vasserot hovered about in a state of agony, pushing the men aside, and getting in their way, and swearing and stamping and raving. Until at last one of the men—a big, burly fellow of a sour visage dropped his end of the piano on the floor, and set his arms akimbo, and glared at his persecutor.

"Why don't yer move it yerself, if yer know so much abaht it," he exclaimed. "Anybody'd fink it was a babby we was movin', instead of a pianner."

"Imbecile!—it is a baby; it is my baby—my child—my all. Now," Vasserot went on, in wheedling tones, "I do implore you, strong man that you are, to be gentle. I am of an impatience—"

"Well—give us a charnce—carn't yer?" exclaimed the man, a little mollified.

Vasserot followed them down into the street, suffering tortures while he saw the thing loaded into the van; then he went up the stairs again, paying no attention to the very obvious hints on the part of the men that the removal had been "warm work."

"They would have filled themselves with their detestable beer, and would have been careless with my piano," he assured himself complacently as he mounted the stairs. "I am always very wise where my art is concerned—always."

He had a thin, worn, flat old valise that had seen much knocking about Europe; this he packed with the odds and ends of garments that still remained to him—a motley collection. Then, standing at the

table, he got a scrap of paper and wrote upon it; held it out to the woman.

"I may not know where to find you, Bathsheba," he said, "when the good and blessed time comes that I summon you to me. Therefore it is well that you should have the place where I am to be found. But beware"—he held up a finger to her threateningly—"beware how you trouble me without reason. I have a certain affection for you at moments—chiefly when you feed me well and are not troublesome; beware lest you shatter that affection."

"I won't trouble you," she answered, with a suspicion of tears in her voice. "I suppose there ain't no 'arm in me stoppin' 'ere fer a day or two—is there?"

"The monstrous rent is paid until the end of the week," answered Vasserot. "Therefore you have the right to remain, if it pleases you."

"Thanks," she murmured again, with the corner of her apron to her eyes. "I shouldn't 'ardly 'ave known where to go to in such a 'urry."

He had set the old valise on the table; after looking at her with a curious half pity and half contempt for a moment or two, he walked round the table and dropped his hands on her shoulders, and shook her a little. The voice that could take on any and every inflection spoke now with a rare gentleness.

"Little Bathsheba—little fool—look up at me!" Then, as she raised her eyes slowly, and looked at him timidly, he suddenly bent and kissed her. "There—that is for a sign of my affection. Cease to repine, my Bathsheba; remember always, for your great comfort and exceeding consolation, that the man to

whom you are wedded is a great artist; think of that always with pride. Once, in a great crisis in my life—in effect, when I was penniless—you helped me with your little money that was lying idle in your Post Office; and your reward has been a very, very great one. But I have at all times sacrificed myself for others, and for the sake of my art; it is characteristic of me. And now—for the moment—farewell."

The last vision he had of her, as he looked back on his way down the stairs, was that she was leaning forlornly out of the doorway, watching him as he went. He waved his hand gaily to her and walked out into the street—to remember, when he was half a mile away, that he had given her no money.

"After all, it is no great matter," he said. "She will manage, as she has always managed; she is an expert in the art of managing. And she may sell the little furniture that is left; it will be a good disposition of it."

By the time he arrived at the end of Little Place, Hampstead, some of his assurance was gone; he was a little afraid. He set the valise on end, and sat down upon it, with his back against a wall, and thought out the subject very deeply. The better to assist his cogitations he took out the little packet of black tobacco and rolled himself a cigarette, and smoked it; then another, and yet another. And at last rose, with an air of determination, and gripped the valise, and walked down to No. 3.

It had grown dark, and lamps were lighted behind windows. As he paused for a moment on the steps before ringing the bell, he heard the voice of Stella singing, and the sound of the piano. He leaned there

against the railings, with the valise at his feet, and smiled amusedly as he listened.

"The little canary is of an assurance that is amazing," he said to himself, as he nodded slowly. "But that the voice is soft, and of a certain gentleness, it would hurt me more than it hurts me now. And yet it is a voice that I would not and could not teach; I should take out of it all that is now in it; and it would not be worth the tears it would cost. Ah!"—as another verse began—"I can bear no more!"

He tugged at the bell, and after a little delay it was opened by Priscilla. Priscilla was getting used to strange happenings in that house by this time; so that it was only mildly exciting when the big man dropped a valise in the little hall, and snatched off his hat and cast it from him; thrust her aside, and entered the drawing-room. Priscilla, shaking her head slowly to denote that she really did not understand these proceedings in the least, closed the outer door and went back to her own quarters.

The song had stopped abruptly as the door was thrust open; Vasserot stood there, drawn to his full height, surveying the scene. Jimmie was standing near the piano, from which the girl had turned to stare at Vasserot; Mrs. Fielding was reclining in an arm-chair; Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy were seated side by side as usual. And, stretched upon the couch, looking up at him lazily, was Michael Doran.

"Little master?" exclaimed Vasserot, with a hand to his throat, almost as though he were choking, "I can bear it no longer. Ladies"—he made a deep bow to them collectively—"I crave your pardons.

You that have hearts will understand and will forgive."

All this in a breathless hurry, while he seemed to struggle for breath. Michael had risen slowly to a sitting position, and then to his feet; as he faced Vasserot the latter suddenly seized him by his shoulders and kissed him with extraordinary rapidity on each cheek.

"Compose yourself, my good Gustave," said the boy. Then, turning to the others, he said, with a little slow smile, "I am sure you will understand, my dear aunts, that Gustave has a great affection for me; you will not think him foolish. If he lives long amongst us in London he will perhaps act differently. Accept my apologies for him; I am sure you will understand."

"They understand—because they have quick little hearts beating in their breasts—especially for you," broke in Vasserot, with half a dozen gestures all at once. "Ladies," he went on, with hands stretched out imploringly, palms upwards, "I have lived for days as a man and a great artist such as I am has no right to live. I have fretted myself; I have troubled myself very greatly. I have imagined the little master here in danger and in solitude—forgetting, perhaps, that ladies with hearts in their breasts were caring for him. But now"—he drew himself up, and spoke with vast determination—"now it is no longer possible for me to separate myself from him. I have tried, and I have struggled, but it cannot be done. I can no longer work, nor eat, nor play the great music that I have always played; I

am a thing lost—a thing abandoned. I have said all that is in my heart; I have spoken!"

Miss Dorcas, as was right and proper, gave a timid welcome to the excited man. "Of course, we are very glad to see you, Mr. Vasserot, and I am sure that Michael also is delighted. We should not like Michael to forget any old friend."

"It would hurt us very much if we thought that in coming here Michael turned his back on anyone," added Miss Betsy.

"I couldn't very well turn my back on Gustave," said the boy, with a smile. "He means everything to me."

"You have heard him?" exclaimed Vasserot, excitedly, and with a broad smile lighting up his ugly face. "We are as one; without me he can do nothing; without him I can do nothing. Long before the world began it was arranged and ordained that this thing should be, and that I, and I alone, should show him to the world."

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Vasserot?" said Miss Dorcas, with a wave of the hand toward a chair. "It is very nice of you to come and see us."

Vasserot bowed again and seated himself. There was silence for a moment or two, while Michael, who had remained standing, looking at Vasserot with almost a twinkle in his dark eyes. The big man was slowly getting over some of his excitement, though his chest still heaved and his mouth kept opening and shutting. Miss Betsy felt that the time had come when she must make conversation.

"Michael has had some happy days with us here," she said. "He has rested himself before beginning

to look about him and decide what his future life shall be."

"His future life?" exclaimed Vasserot, with a great arching of his eyebrows. "That is decided—that is settled. His future life! Did I not tell you of a voice of gold?"

The boy still watched; but now he laughed, with a little quick laugh that was but the thing of a moment.

"I remember now that you told us that Michael sang," said Miss Dorcas.

Vasserot's head began to waggle about; he nodded many times. "Oh, yes—of a certainty I told you that he sang; is it likely that I should forget a little thing like that? Is it possible, little master," he added very softly—"is it just possible that you have not told the ladies that you sang, and that you have not sung to them?"

"I have not sung to them; I have rested myself and have let others sing to me," answered the boy, quietly.

"Ah, it is to me evident that I should have arrived myself before," said Vasserot, getting to his feet. "You will have suffered, Michael, more than I had intended you to suffer. Did I say that he sang?" he went on, getting suddenly excited again. "Have a little patience, ladies; you shall judge for yourselves."

Once more he turned Stella, not ungently, from her seat; he sat down at the piano and ran his long fingers over the keys. And while he did so he kept muttering to himself such phrases as—"Did I say he sang?" and "Of a certainty he sings just a little!"

—and lastly—“God of the singing angels! you shall hear him.”

The boy moved across to the piano; frowned a little at the music Vasserot was playing. “Why that?” he asked impatiently.

“Because it is good for you, and it is something that they will comprehend,” muttered Vasserot. And then, with the utmost cheerfulness to the ladies, and with a smile—“The piano is a beast!”

Michael Doran sang *Every valley shall be exalted*, from the *Messiah*. He was so rapt up in what he was doing, and so put his whole soul into the music, that he might have been in the midst of a desert for anything that he saw of his surroundings. It was only when the last note had died away, and had left the room to an utter silence, that he started and looked about him.

And there the sisters sat, gripping hands and staring at him. Down the unconscious cheek of Miss Betsy a tear was stealing; Stella, with all her heart in her eyes, was staring at him, and weeping unrestrainedly. Vasserot got up from the piano, and closed it.

“For to-night that is sufficient,” said Vasserot. “You will observe that I did not speak of vain things, and that I did not talk foolishly. Of a certainty he sings.”

“Oh—Michael—Michael—it is wonderful!” breathed Miss Betsy, looking at the boy with new eyes.

“Why did you let me sing to you, Cousin Michael?” whispered Stella.

“Why, little canary?” answered the boy. “Because I liked to hear you sing; you have a soft and pretty

voice. I shall like to hear you sing often and often; it rests me. My voice is not a voice like anyone else's," he added complacently and solemnly. "It is a gift from God."

"That is the truth," exclaimed Vasserot, gazing round upon them all, and contemplating the effect the voice had made upon them. "A gift from God! It is a little pity to me sometimes that the little master may not die young, and so surprise the choir of angels while yet the great voice is all there in his throat. And—mark you this—it is a voice that I have made. It was all there in the beginning, and I have drawn it out, note for note, and tone for tone. Truly it is wonderful!"

Truly it was wonderful; they recognized that as they looked covertly at this wondrous boy who could perform such a miracle. The little shabby drawing-room seemed glorified; it would never be the same again. Something marvelous had happened; the sisters and Stella were stirred to their very depths by it. The strangeness of the boy's beauty was borne in upon them as it had not been before; this was no mere handsome, genial Cousin Michael, who was kind and tender to them all; but a strange being with a strange power, who had dropped into their midst from out the great world, and yet did not belong to them. It is no exaggeration to say that they were all a little afraid. They came to themselves, as it were, to find the boy lying on the couch in the old attitude, and with his eyes closed; Vasserot was speaking.

"My art demands that I shall do this thing—that I shall preserve this voice of gold. There is no hell

too deep for me if I neglect a charge so sacred. I that have found shall keep; I am as one that has a precious jewel that must be shown to the world. And you"—he waved a quivering hand toward the startled sisters—"it is left for you to assist me. You have done much; you shall do more. Judge me now tonight, and judge if I have spoken truth. Your tears have told me; no words are necessary. Even the little canary have I misjudged; for though she cannot sing, and though it never shall be given to her to sing, yet must she have music deep in the soul of her, or she could not have wept. She is a good little canary, and understands."

He sat so long silent after that, with his chin propped in his hands, and his elbows on his knees, that presently Flora Fielding, awaking with a start from a reverie, got up to depart. Everyone seemed to wake up then. Even Jimmie got to his feet and shook himself, and came out of a dream. Michael got up from the couch, and stood in his charming, easy fashion to say good-night to the departing visitors; he only smiled and bowed when Flora Fielding, a little at a loss, murmured a polite word of thanks.

"Thank you so much for singing to us."

Jimmie Fielding came forward awkwardly, and for the first time stretched out a hand to the boy. "Your voice is almost too big for a room," was his comment.

Vasserot had not moved during the farewells. It was only after the door was closed, and the little ladies had hesitatingly come back into the room, that the man suddenly started up and spoke as with a quick decision. If by any chance either Miss Dorcas

or Miss Betsy had noticed the old valise in the hall they had not spoken of it.

"It is impossible that I go from this place to-night," cried Vasserot. "I have been moved and shaken as never have I been moved before. The voice of the little master has shown me this thing: that I must remain. I should kill myself if I neglected any longer the duty that is before me. I must remain with the little master. It is imperative."

"But I'm afraid—" Miss Dorcas hung on her uncompleted sentence, with her lips apart.

"Somehow to-night it seems to me that I need Gustave with me," said Michael, slowly. "There are moments when I do not need him; but now it is different. I am rested; I have lived quietly for a few days in the music of your soft voices; now I must work. I need Vasserot very much to-night."

"The little master has spoken," said Vasserot, folding his arms. "For to-night, at least, I need nothing; I can sleep anywhere. To-morrow an attic—a cellar even for the poor Gustave, who lives only for the little master. But to-night, nothing; such sleep as I shall snatch can be obtained even on this couch."

It seemed impossible to turn the man out; and they were all still under the spell of that wonderful voice that had stirred them so deeply. So that presently Miss Dorcas found herself carrying down pillows and a rug; and so leaving the big man and Michael in the little shabby drawing-room.

Presently they heard Michael come up to his room. Half an hour afterwards Miss Dorcas opened the door of her sister's room, and asked softly if she was asleep. Miss Betsy scrambled out of bed and put on

a dressing-gown; the two sisters, white-faced and whispering, went out on to the landing.

"Do you smell something burning?" whispered Miss Dorcas.

Miss Betsy sniffed. "It's like tobacco," she said. "It doesn't smell very nice—but perhaps—"

"I remember Michael said that he smoked villainous tobacco," whispered Miss Dorcas, peering anxiously over the staircase head.

"I expect it'll be all right," whispered the other, nervously. And they went back to their beds.

CHAPTER VII

HIGH FINANCE

MICHAEL DORAN awoke the next morning to find the autumn sunlight coming in through the windows, and Gustave Vasserot sitting on the side of his bed. The boy turned over half sleepily, and put an arm across his eyes to keep out the light, and smiled.

"Hullo, Gustave!" he said. "What's the time?"

"I could not tell you with any degree of accuracy," answered the other, plunging a finger and thumb for a moment into his waistcoat pocket. "My watch—but it is not necessary that I should tell you of my watch; some day he will return to me; may that day be very soon. I should judge it to be nearly eight o'clock."

"You're an early bird, Gustave," said the boy.

"It has pleased me to rise myself early this morning; there is much to be done. Moreover, delicacy forbade that I should remain in a room where presently the family assembles itself; therefore I rose and made my way into the cooking place—thereby startling the person who presides there. She was indignant; but it is not my intention to disturb anyone in this house, or to cause unnecessary trouble. Therefore I cleansed myself in a place where there

were many pots and pans—and after that I went for a walk. The air here will be of great benefit to you, little master—of very great benefit indeed."

The boy lay still, looking at the ugly, rugged face above him; presently he spoke. "And what are your plans, Gustave; now that you have arrived yourself, as you term it, what are you going to do?"

Vasserot looked straight in front of him out of the window. "I am going to proceed with deliberation, and yet with quickness," he said. "The great thing has been accomplished: that you are here in safety; the greater thing still—that the little privations you suffered have not in any way harmed the voice. Ah, but I had a fear for that voice, my little one; I have lain awake at night thinking of it. But you will bear in mind," he added, turning his head and nodding it many times—"you will bear carefully in mind that the good Gustave went without sometimes, in order that the voice of the little master should not suffer. Some day you shall reward the good Gustave for that—or he will reward himself; it is very much the same thing. Now—to our plans."

He glanced at the door, swinging his great body round and lowering his head; then he swung back again, and spoke impressively and in a lower tone.

"In the first place, it becomes necessary that we array ourselves in such fashion that the world shall not say of us—'Look you, there go two men in shabby clothing; snap your fingers and pass them by on the other side!' No—no—my little one; it shall not be done in that fashion. When we walk abroad people shall turn and look at us, and shall say to themselves—'Look you, there go men with money jingling in

their pockets; let us take notice of them.' In the first place, we must have clothing."

"I suppose that is necessary," murmured the boy.

"It is vital. We go to the good aunts to-day, and we point to ourselves, and we show them the necessity that we should be well clad. When we lived in garrets it did not matter; food and warmth were more necessary; but now we have stepped ourselves up in the world. Clothes first, little master, before anything."

"And after that?"

Vasserot closed up his eyes until they were mere slits, and then wagged a long forefinger before his nose. "After that, my little one—and quickly after that—a little—just a very little—money. The good aunts have heard the voice; you did not see the tear that was called up by the voice—did you? I was watching; I saw all. We will play upon the hearts of the good aunts; we will draw money from them as we need it. Oh, yes—of a certainty we will draw money from them."

Michael sat up in bed, and drew his hands about his knees, and looked at the other man. "Look here, Gustave," he said, "you be careful how you go."

"Careful? In what way?"

"In the way of money," was the quiet answer. "We're men of the world—at least you are—and I told you before that I wouldn't have these aunts taken advantage of. Even in a day or two they've been tremendously good to me; it seems as if I was a child, with my mother looking after me, all over again. I can't tell you; you wouldn't understand. But I think for a time, until I can get some engage-

ments, that we'll go slowly and not talk about getting money."

Vasserot beat his clenched fists softly on his knees for a moment or two. Then at last, very softly, and as one speaking to a child, he dropped out a word or two, in a casual, careless fashion, knowing well the effect it would have.

"Very well, my little one, doubtless you know best. It is not for Gustave to interfere. Gustave, who's done so much, and has worked so hard, and has starved in garrets and other mean places; oh, no, it is not for Gustave to interfere. You shall take your little engagements; you shall sing on draughty stages in choruses; you shall demean yourself and walk home on nights when it rains—until the voice is gone and threadbare and harsh. You shall do all this." And then, with a sudden new violence, sprang to his feet, and raised his arms above his head, and shrieked out—"God of the singing angels!—is it for this that I have slaved—that I have dreamed—is it for this?"

"Be quiet—they'll wonder what's the matter," said the boy, sharply.

The mood of the big man changed in a moment; he stepped across to the bed, and suddenly dropped on his knees there and clutched the boy's arm.

"I will be quiet—I will compose myself," he said, in a husky whisper. "But listen to me; attend to me with patience. You shall not do little things, my Israfel—I say you shall not. I had thought—mark you this; it is so easily done—I had thought of a concert."

"Now—at once?" the boy stammered.

"Now—and at once!" cried the other, instantly

excited. "I have despaired of it; I have felt that it could not be done. But a little money to the right man—and who knows that right man, or a dozen right men, better than Gustave Vasserot?—and the thing is accomplished. A portrait in profile, here, there and everywhere, with the announcement of the concert; a portrait—who knows?—might bring some of the women; I have known it happen. And then the concert—and the voice. . . . For a little space after that I should fold my hands and I should wait."

"And what is all this going to cost?" asked the boy, looking at him anxiously.

"A little fifty pounds—no more and no less," said Vasserot, in a whisper. "Not a penny should be wasted; and in a little time afterwards the fifty pounds, and many other fifty pounds, will all come fluttering back to the good little aunts in the little house here where we are. The thing is of a simplicity that makes me laugh."

"I don't think they'll do it," said the boy, slowly. "They don't understand these things as you do."

"They will do it—and they will understand," said Vasserot, with a touch of impatience. "You must not tell me; I know and understand women—and I say that they will do it. Why, the little canary had tears in her blue eyes when you sang last night—tears running down her soft pink cheeks. If any difficulty should arise, make love to the little canary; that should be simple enough."

The boy laughed, and a flush stole over his face. "There should be no difficulty about that," he said. "She's delightful—and I'm half in love with her already."

"Be but half in love and all is well," said Vasserot, nodding his head once or twice. "But with all that lies before you, my little one, be not wholly in love yet. In the stars of heaven it is written that there is a very great future for you; and it may happen that you will look back upon this place, and upon the little canary with the blue eyes, and the little timid aunts, and all the rest of it, with a laugh that is light, and with an easy forgetfulness."

"Having made use of them as stepping-stones?" suggested the boy, a little bitterly.

"Of a certainty. Having made use of them as stepping-stones. It must happen in this world always. It must happen also with you, little master, that you break hearts as you go along; it is inevitable. Now, will you trust yourself to the good Gustave; will you leave all to him?"

"I suppose I must," answered Michael, with a shrug. "I hope everything will turn out all right—but I'm a little afraid."

Vasserot rose to his feet. "When Gustave Vasserot grows afraid you shall tremble," he said. "Nay, more—you shall tremble for your very life—but not before Gustave Vasserot grows afraid. Never before that!"

It was a new Michael Doran that came down to breakfast that morning. New—not in his own eyes, but in theirs. Before, he had been but a genial, high-spirited, rather whimsical, handsome boy, of whom they thought tenderly because of the poor dead little mother that lay in a foreign cemetery far away. But this morning he was something wonderful—something they had not suspected. Miss Dorcas and Miss

Betsy secretly blushed at the terrible things they had said concerning his singing before they had heard him sing; they wondered what Michael, and still more this terrible, ugly, excitable Vasserot, must think of them and of their ignorance.

“Don’t you think,” whispered Miss Dorcas on the landing to her sister, “that it would be well if we had the piano tuned?”

“I’m afraid it’s too late,” whispered Miss Betsy. “He said it was a beast.”

“We might have it done while they were both out,” whispered the other.

Vasserot had slept well; Vasserot had been out on their so charming Heath, and the little breezes had blown about him; Vasserot was in excellent spirits, and was charmed with everything. His appetite was somewhat alarming, and he seemed to eat a great many things all at once, and to talk at the same time at a very great rate; there were no pauses in the conversation where Vasserot was concerned. And one thing that was specially noticed by Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy was his extraordinary deference to Michael.

If such a simile may be used, it may be said that he was like a rough old mother to the boy—a tenderly rough old mother. He was a little disconcerting at times; as when, for instance, his own plate happened to hold a larger piece of bacon than that of Michael; when he snatched the boy’s plate and hurriedly substituted his own for it. Or when, as the boy fumbled with an egg and talked at the same time, Vasserot suddenly caught up the egg and dexterously broke it open, and handed it back.

"It is of a great coldness already," he said impatiently. "Eat it quickly, I beg of you."

And always Michael laughed, as though it were the greatest joke in the world that Vasserot should look after him.

Breakfast ended, the big man took upon himself the entire direction of everything. "It is necessary that you should breathe the fresh air," he said to the boy. "Take the little Cousin Stella out on what you call your Heath, and draw in deep breaths—and do not talk too much. There is much that I have to say to these good ladies, your aunts. Run away, children, and disport yourselves out of doors."

It was done in so masterful a fashion that no one thought of interfering. And presently, when Michael and Stella had set out, Vasserot had planted himself in the little drawing-room, with the sisters seated opposite to him, and with his busy fingers rolling cigarettes from the little square packet of black tobacco. Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy tried to smother coughs behind polite hands, and Vasserot noticed nothing of that, and went on smoking at a great rate.

He began with talk of the boy. They had heard his voice; they knew now that the good Gustave had not lied to them; they knew that the voice was indeed, as Michael had said, a gift from God. (At this point Vasserot clasped his hands and raised his eyes piously toward the ceiling, and moved his lips without uttering a word.) It was indeed wonderful that such a voice could exist; he reeled off a string of names of men who were known on both sides of the Atlantic; among them all was not one with such a voice as this. Such purity, such power, simply did

not exist. Never had the world heard such a voice before.

He ended on a little *plea* for clothes for the boy. For himself, it did not matter; he was a great artist, and people must take him at his own valuation; clothes did not matter. But the boy must go out into the world, and must sing at great places, and before great people; the boy must be well dressed. Shame had forbidden Michael to speak of this thing; the good Gustave must plead for him. It was a little matter, but Gustave knew best.

It ended, of course, in apologies from Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy that they should not have thought of this. It had not seemed to them that Michael had really looked shabby. What had they better do?

Instantly Vasserot, all smiles, begged that they would leave such a little foolish matter to him. Michael must be dressed with a certain extravagance; because the public liked that, just as they would like to see this beautiful boy with his beautiful hair longer than ordinary. It could all be safely left with the good Gustave; the little silly bills should be sent in to Miss Teakle. It was a matter of so great simplicity that it reduced Vasserot to laughter.

In the very act of thanking them, and of going out of the room, he remembered another little matter; little matters always slipped away from him and he was likely to forget them.

"It is imperative that I should, for the moment, be near to the little master; I say that it is imperative," he said, with deep earnestness. "Any corner would do for the good Gustave to stretch himself in; at the same time he would not willingly disturb

the good ladies of the house. Was there not a garret—a mere tiny cupboard—in which he could rest himself, and sleep?"

Miss Dorcas ventured with some boldness to suggest that it might perhaps be better for Mr. Vasserot to seek a lodging elsewhere; it would be possible for him to get a room somewhere in the neighborhood.

Deep dejection settled upon the man at once. It was that they did not care to have him in the house—that he had in some fashion wounded hearts that were sensitive; that he had blundered. Let them speak; let them tell him in what fashion he had offended. The man was near to tears.

That matter ended, of course, in the reluctant declaration that there was a room—at the very top of the house; but a place with no furniture in it; Miss Betsy could not see how it could possibly be used as a sleeping apartment. But Vasserot, all wild excitement in a moment, demanded to be allowed to inspect it; and presently mounted the stairs with the sisters, and so came to that little gate at the head of the stairs that had been put there, years before, to save a venturesome child from possible accident.

"It is delightful!" exclaimed Vasserot, instantly. "The pretty little gate seems to shut one away from the world; the gate that one opens and shuts with a great care; it is like a new game. And the room—it is perfection! Ah—ladies—ladies, and you would have prevented me from resting myself in this place! That was most unkind; the good Gustave will not lightly forgive that."

Miss Dorcas glanced at Miss Betsy; Miss Betsy

gave her a look of dismay. "But where," asked Miss Dorcas of Vasserot, "will you sleep?"

Vasserot shrugged his shoulders, and beamed amiably upon them. "Sleep? I shall sleep here. It is a great room, and I shall arrange myself admirably in it."

"But there is no bed," suggested Miss Betsy.

"Bah!—a bed is a little thing. Perhaps a mattress on the floor—a little pillow and a rug; and the good Gustave can sleep admirably and with great soundness. Trouble not your heads, ladies, about such a little matter, I beg of you."

The little ladies, however, troubled their heads very much about the business, and wondered what they should do. They talked of nothing else; and at one time it was even suggested that Miss Betsy should vacate her own room and go into that occupied by her sister; and so let Vasserot have a proper room in which to sleep. But tears sprang to the eyes of Miss Betsy at the mere thought of giving up her room and all its dainty prettinesses, and allowing this huge, uncouth man to take possession.

"We ought to have been firm," said Miss Dorcas. "We ought to have told him that he could go to some other lodging, and that we would, if necessary, pay the expenses."

"It's too late now," sighed Miss Betsy. "He has seen the room at the top of the house, and he intends to sleep there, if he has to sleep on the floor."

Therefore, presently, the sisters put on their hats and went out in search of shops. Finding a cheap furniture shop, they shuddered at the prospect of introducing the things offered to them into No. 3,

Little Place; it would be like putting a new and gaudy patch on some somber faded old tapestry. But it had to be done; and finally a few articles necessary for the furnishing of the room were bought, on the strict understanding that they should be delivered before a certain hour, in order that the room might be got ready.

It happened that Vasserot, who had gone out on business, as he stated, returned at the very moment that the van was being unloaded at the door, and the alien furniture taken in. He expressed his delight in characteristic fashion, and insisted upon accompanying each article of furniture up the stairs, cheering on the bearers, or alternately cursing them. He decided exactly where each article was to go, and when all was completed, and the men had gone, he stood in the center of the room, looking about him, and rubbing his hands gleefully.

"It is my little home!" he exclaimed.

"I'm sure we're very glad that you are pleased with everything," said Miss Dorcas.

"I am delighted!" he cried. "Here shall Gustave Vasserot rest himself and dream of great music; here shall he arrange the fortunes of the little master. Everything is perfection, and I am near to tears when I think of all your kindness. A mere hint—a suggestion on the part of the poor Gustave, and the little ladies with kind hearts rush out and buy all that is necessary for my comfort. Ah—it is too much; I am strangely moved!"

It was afterwards, when they were alone together, that Miss Betsy said to Miss Dorcas—"You see, my dear, if we had really been firmer he would not have

wanted to take the room after all. However, it's done now and can't be helped. We must hope that it will turn out well—for Michael's sake."

Within a day or two various cardboard boxes began to arrive, addressed to "Michael Doran, Esq."—boxes from tailors and outfitters and hosiers and others. There seemed to be quite a number of boxes, and the sisters, knowing nothing of these matters, could only wonder that one slim youth should require so much. The explanation was to come afterwards.

The explanation came when Michael walked down to breakfast one morning, extremely well dressed in a new suit, and with obviously new shoes and linen, and everything else complete. He stood, in boyish fashion, for a moment in the doorway, and bowed to the sisters and to Stella—so displaying himself in his new glory.

"I am sure you look very nice, Michael," said Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy, almost in a breath.

And at that moment Vasserot appeared in the doorway, absolutely transfigured. He, too, had on a new suit, of fashionable cut, and new shoes and new linen and everything else. He, too, bowed to the ladies with an air, while they stared at him blankly.

"It came upon me like a great inspiration," said Vasserot, as he seated himself at the table and began to help himself to food; "it flashed upon me in an instant. I saw myself shabby and ashamed; I asked myself—how could I help the little master in a so terrible condition of shabbiness? Should I not rather make of myself a laughing-stock if I went with broken shoes and a coat with holes in it? Therefore I said to myself that I would be even as

the little master, so we would go hand-in-hand—like a big brother and a little brother together; and people would say—"They are rich—they are comfortable; we will take much notice of them." It is the way of the world, ladies; I, that know the world, say this!"

After all, it seemed a reasonable argument, although Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy exchanged covert glances across the table. But it was when the various bills came in, and the two gray heads were laid together over them, and over a nice calculation as to the total, that Miss Betsy looked at Miss Dorcas in blank dismay.

"My dear, I had no idea that men's clothes cost so much!"

"It is rather a great deal," answered Miss Dorcas. "But perhaps the things will last a very long time. And I am sure that dear Michael looks very nice."

The new clothes certainly had a very great effect upon Vasserot. To see him swaggering down Little Place was to see a great and wonderful sight. An air of importance had been added to his former swagger; when he rang the bell of the house for admittance he stood with arms akimbo and his back to the door, looking to right and to left, quite with the air of one who had recently taken the house and all that was in it, and had begun to like the neighborhood.

"To-day," he announced suddenly one morning, "I begin to move myself—and all for little Michael. This will be a great day for the little Michael," he added, benignly smiling upon the boy. "I go now to see one who will arrange with me that the little

master shall sing—and shall sing, too, before a great audience. The thing is accomplished!"

"How delightful!" exclaimed Miss Dorcas.

"How splendid!" exclaimed Miss Betsy.

"It is a difficult thing—but of difficulties I am not afraid," said Vasserot. "It is but for the little master to be heard, and all will then arrange itself. I go to the greatest man there is—a magician, who shall wave his hands so that the thing makes itself. I shall come back to you with very great news. Await me with patience."

They could scarcely be expected to do that; they talked of nothing else. The sisters already saw the wonderful boy on a platform, with a hall crowded to excess; and they in the front row, looking up at him, and hearing the voice which, in a sense, belonged to them, because it belonged to him. They wondered where the concert would take place, and whether by any chance they would be able to get good seats if they applied for them at once; it would be terrible to have to sit in the back row, perhaps.

Only Michael said little. He paced about the room, with his fingers twitching; he did not look at them while they talked. At every ring at the bell he looked eagerly out of the window, only to turn away dejectedly.

At last Vasserot came. Not the Vasserot who had started out, cheerfully humming an air, and with his hat set rakishly; but another Vasserot, with shoulders drooping and hands thrust deep in his new pockets, and his hat drawn over his eyes. It was a new hat, but he tossed it into a corner when he entered the little drawing-room, and sat down, and spread out

his hands suddenly with a helpless gesture. Then, with his face working and his lips moving convulsively, as though in an effort to get out words, he suddenly dropped his face into his hands, and burst into forlorn tears.

It was admirably done, and its effect was immediate and startling. Miss Betsy got to her feet in a great hurry, and with her Miss Dorcas; they stood together, looking at him, with their hands clasped, as though waiting for news of a great disaster. Michael, white-faced, stood staring also, and saying nothing. They had all been waiting for his return—just hovering about uncertainly, watching for him.

“You have failed, Mr. Vasserot?” whispered Miss Betsy.

He jumped to his feet at the moment that Stella came quickly into the room to hear the news. He stood there, with wet eyes, and with a great tragedy written in his face. When he spoke it was with slow deliberation; he let each word drop out, that it might have its full effect.

“Yes—the poor Gustave has failed,” he said. “I thought that I had counted all matters with care; this little point raised and disposed of; this other one, to frighten me for but a moment, and then to be brushed aside. But I had not counted on the imbecility of one man; the obstinacy that is mule-like of that one man. And yet”—he shook his head and pursed up his lips—“and yet is that one man right, from the point of view of himself.”

“Let us know what has happened,” said the boy, in a dull voice.

“Seat yourselves and listen to me; forgive me that

I walk about; I am filled with an excitement that is intense. I have grasped at the light skirts of Fortune for a moment; and she has laughed at me and has run away. Ah, the pity of it!"

Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy sat down, as usual side by side, with pitying eyes upon the man; Stella, in seating herself, looked only at Michael, who stood with his back to the window.

"I went this morning full of a great hope—and not a hope alone—but a certainty," began Vasserot, striding about, and stopping every now and then to beat in a point with one hand upon another. "For a time all was as smooth and as easy as one could wish. I sent my name to the man I wished to meet; and no stupid message came back to me that he was away, or that illness was upon him, or that he was filled with business and could not see me. In less time than it takes to tell one—two—three—I was in his room, and he was smiling and shaking me by the hand. All was well; my heart was beating and I could have embraced him!"

He paced about again, making little sentences with his lips, which he did not utter, and little gestures with his hands.

"I told him of the little master—of Michael of the golden voice—a voice such as had never been heard before. Oh, he was of a politeness colossal; he listened to me and let me talk—and talk—and talk again. And then very slowly he took up a pen, and he began to talk on his side about what he called the business of it."

He was working himself into a fury—into a vehemence that was presently to sweep them away. It

was quite a long time, as it seemed to the listeners, before he resumed, and then his words came tripping over each other at a tremendous rate.

"It would appear to me that I am not believed; that so many voices of gold go to this man every week—every day—every hour, and are found to be of metal that is base. The man is tired of it; the man risks himself never again. Nevertheless, when I have talked a little, and when I have shown him a portrait of Michael—(and he is much pleased with the portrait, and lingers upon it a little)—then it is that he will do the thing I ask—and will himself arrange a concert. Oh, yes"—this with deep and bitter irony—"he will make a concert for the little Michael."

"Well?" Three voices seemed to speak at once.

"All shall be done—the advertisements and the what you call booming—and the pictures and everything; to this man it is a very easy matter. And all he asks of me—there, while he sits in front of me, and smiles—is a little fifty pounds."

The man's sharp eyes had watched for the effect of this announcement, even while he seemed to throw off the suggestion casually. That suggestion being met by the sisters with blank faces he went on hurriedly.

"So, with all my castles tumbled about me, I laugh in the face of this man, and I tell him that he is a fool, and that I have not fifty pence in the wide world. And, with a breaking heart, I leave him and I come away. It is finished!"

It may be mentioned that the record of the interview was not absolutely correct. Gustave Vasserot

had indeed told this particular man of the voice of gold which was in his possession, and had shown the photograph; but the end of the interview had been somewhat different from his version of it. He had told the agent airily that he thought it quite possible he could secure the fifty pounds. And in the breast-pocket of Vasserot's new coat at that very moment reposed the draft contract for a concert, with full particulars as to what the agent was prepared to do if Vasserot could find fifty pounds.

"But surely," suggested Miss Dorcas—"surely, if this man heard Michael sing, he would be ready to help him."

"Dear lady, your innocence and your ignorance are alike charming," murmured Vasserot, "but they do not help us. This man is a great man in his own way; it was for that reason that I went to him. But he deals with great people—people who are known; he is content to work for them, because he is sure that there is nothing for him to lose, and very, very much for him to gain. And he does not wish to hear Michael alone; he does not pretend that he can judge him. It is the public—the great public with ears of pigs but with money in their pockets—he wants them to listen to Michael—but at a price. Oh, yes—at a price!"

There was a long silence in the room; the little ladies could almost hear their hearts beat. Michael glanced at them once, but looked away again immediately; he saw that they were watching him. And then the voice of Miss Dorcas, with a little tremor in it, and a certain difficulty about choosing words, broke the silence.

"And if it should be possible for that fifty pounds to be paid—by anyone—to this man—would he arrange the concert?"

"It is a certainty!" exclaimed Vasserot, passionately.

"And would it happen then that the proper people—the people who would help Michael—would it happen that they would hear him? Could this man arrange all that?"

"It should be done. I pledge my life and my soul upon it!" he cried.

Miss Betsy was watching her sister; the face of Miss Dorcas was a little whiter than usual, but with bright spots on her cheek-bones.

"This is a great thing, Mr. Vasserot," she said slowly. "If this money could be found, do you feel—oh!—are you certain—that all would be well for Michael, and that he could become the great singer you believe him to be?"

"Madam, I am as certain as that I stand here in your house at this moment, and that I look into your eyes. With the little fifty pounds the thing is accomplished."

Miss Dorcas took her sister's hand, as she always did in great moments; it always gave the effect that they spoke together in perfect agreement.

"God forbid that we should stand in dear Michael's way—if only for the sake of his dear, dead mother. We are not rich, Mr. Vasserot, but we have a little money—a very little—put aside. This must mean that some of that which is put aside must be disposed of, and our little income reduced even by a small amount. But you shall have the fifty pounds."

Michael suddenly hid his face in his hands. "Oh—my God!" he said, in a smothered voice. Vasserot did an astounding thing; he turned round twice, as though not knowing where he was, and blindly groping for something, rushed at the sisters and caught their disengaged hands, and began to smother them with kisses.

When they were more composed it seemed as though they were all talking at once. But the voice of Gustave Vasserot overtopped the others.

"The poor Gustave has made no mistake—mark you this, little master—mark you this! Said I not, when I told you of the meeting with the good little aunts, that they had gentle hearts beating in their breasts, and that all would be well? My heart, that was of the substance of lead, is like a feather floating in air; everything is now accomplished. You shall sing, little Michael; and because your heart is light you shall sing even better than you have done before. And after that"—he snapped his fingers and laughed—"after that we fold our hands, to a little extent at least, and watch them coming to us—all the people who are to pay good gold to hear you sing. It is accomplished!"

"To-morrow morning, dear Betsy, we must go down into the City and arrange matters," said Miss Dorcas.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREAT DAY

THE sisters had got up very early one morning, and had breakfasted in their hats at an absurdly early hour; for were they not going into that terrible place—the City—and had they not to interview solicitors and generally to talk business.

Quite a lot of water had flowed under the bridges and away out to sea since the little ladies had gone down to the City; they trembled now at the mere prospect of it. They knew perfectly well that crafty men sat in offices with pens in their hands, and with one desire and one only in their hearts: to rob the little ladies of all that they had so carefully put by. They knew, too, that omnibuses were out that day for the express purpose of taking them in the wrong direction; and that those omnibuses were under the guidance of conductors specially trained to over-charge them in the matter of fares. And they were absolutely certain in their own minds that hordes of pickpockets were at that hour emerging from dreadful slums, in special search of the little ladies.

A matter of trepidation to set forth at all; but it had to be done. Gustave Vasserot, in his eagerness, had offered to escort them, but, while thinking him politely, they had a little coldly refused the sugges-

tion. They did not wish to have Vasserot sitting with them in a lawyer's office, and listening with all his ears concerning investments and other matters.

So, gripping each other's hands, like two rather pitiful elderly children going into a dim and awful forest where giants and dragons lurked, they went down into the City. Thither we need not follow them, nor need we listen to the arguments of a kindly old solicitor, who hoped that they were well advised to be selling valuable stock at such a time. Let us rather wait until, with glad and relieved hearts, they stand again on the broad steps outside No. 3, Little Place, Hampstead, grateful to think that they have escaped the many dangers of the day, and have contrived to steer clear of the many nets spread for their unwary feet.

"Never," said Miss Dorcas, as she sat in the little drawing-room, exhaustedly sipping at a cup of tea and still wearing her hat—"never would I do that again, not even for dear Michael."

"It has certainly been a very trying day," corroborated Miss Betsy to Stella. "And of course we went into the wrong place to get lunch—a place simply full of men, who all stared at us. We made an excuse, and came away; and then we lost ourselves; and if it hadn't been for—"

"—A very large kindly policeman, who took charge of us, and directed us to a place where there were waitresses and scones and things—"

"—I really don't know what would have become of us," finished Miss Betsy.

In due course the legal letter arrived, enclosing a cheque—for a little more than the amount required

by Vasserot. Miss Dorcas had felt that there might be other expenses, and the ordinary dividends were not quite due yet. And so at last Gustave Vasserot received the cheque for fifty pounds, and kissed the hand that gave it to him, and declared many times that everything was now perfected, and that there was no further necessity for anyone to trouble about matters; they must trust to the good Gustave.

Thereafter the good Gustave made many journeys. He would return late in the evening in an exhausted condition, but still filled with excitement; he would detail something of what he had done during the day. Of how he had seen this man and that; of letters that had been written, and arrangements that were to be made. On one such evening he sat down absent-mindedly at the piano, even in the midst of talking. He struck a chord or two, and then suddenly threw up his hands in despair, and twisted round on the piano-stool and faced the sisters.

"I tell you of a certainty, ladies, that it is impossible." He struck more chords. "Hark to him!" He pounded away with grimaces. "Said I not at the first that the piano was a beast." He pounded away again. "It is impossible that I do anything with him!"

"It is a very good piano," said Miss Dorcas, a little stiffly.

"Madam, it *was* a very good piano—some long time ago. But never again—never in this world."

"It can be tuned," suggested Miss Betsy.

"Dear lady—it can be tuned—and tuned again—and tuned all the day and all the night; and the tuner will laugh behind his hand and take his money, and go away. And the piano will be just the same

piano as it was before the advent of the tuner at all."

"But what is the matter with it?" asked Miss Dorcas.

"It has survived itself too long," said Vasserot. "It is worn out. And at this present moment"—he brought his hand down smartly with a jarring sound on the keys—"I am expiring for a piano by which I shall teach the little master what he is to sing. It will kill him, and it will kill me, if he sings to this."

Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy exchanged glances; it seemed that they were not at the end of their troubles yet. And at that moment Michael came into the room, and, looking from one to the other—and especially at Vasserot seated in a dejected attitude at the piano—laughed whimsically and put a natural question.

"Why—what's the matter?"

"It is this piano of an antiquity indescribable," exclaimed Vasserot. "I would not permit you to exercise your voice with him; he is a relic of ages that are dark."

"Well—we must practice elsewhere, I suppose," answered the boy.

"Not so—never!" cried Vasserot. "Have I not described to you, my little one, over and over again, that this is to be a business of secrecy? The voice will not be heard until you stand up on the platform before a lot of people. I figured to myself that you would practice here—with no one but our good friends to listen to you. That—alas!—is impossible."

"Well, but what are we to do?" asked Michael, petulantly, with a stamp of his foot.

"There is a little way, and a simple way," said

Vasserot. "I have a piano of the finest—the one thing left to me out of all that was once mine. If we could have that piano—ah!—what a tone—what a softness and yet a richness! It is a little piano—what you call an upright—but a king of uprights. If that little piano could be here!"

That matter ended, of course, in Miss Dorcas making inquiries as to where this marvellous piano was to be found. Vasserot explained that it was carefully stored away against such a moment as this; it would be a matter of the utmost simplicity to bring it to the house.

"But what will you do with that?" demanded Miss Betsy, tragically, pointing to the piano.

Vasserot shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"You may put it where you like; you cannot harm it," he said. "It has been a good and faithful little piano; you are doubtless attached to it. Put him away—in any corner; it does not matter."

Thus it came about that Vasserot made yet another journey; and a van arrived from which his own piano was unloaded and taken into the house. The despised and rejected was put away with difficulty into a corner of the dining-room; and Vasserot, arriving presently, smiled with great contentment when he saw his beloved in its place. He sat down and ran his fingers over the keys.

"Do not your little ears, ladies, detect the great difference? Is it possible that you do not feel yourselves stirred within at these sounds? Now we can send for the tuner person; and the tuner person will be glad to have such a piano under his fingers."

Two days later Gustave Vasserot rang the bell

three times, wild with impatience; Priscilla, for perhaps the first time in her life, actually ran along the little hall to open the door. He burst into the house and into the drawing-room; and there, with a smile, bent himself in the middle and bowed; then laughed and clapped his hands, and looked about him delightedly.

“It is accomplished; it is arranged; it is what you call pencilled in. I have a date!”

He seated himself, as usual, in the center of a group of four. It appeared that a date had actually been booked at a certain hall—“A little hall, but of a size sufficient; I have tested him”—and that the work of printing a poster was going on at that very moment. A portrait of the little master—in profile, and looking like a sort of angelic cameo—was to adorn the poster. Oh, yes—it was all accomplished!

“And now, my little Michael”—this with an admonishing finger shaken playfully at the boy—“now to work, and to work hard. There shall be no mistake; there shall be no little blunders; it shall all be of a perfection that has never been heard before. If, ladies”—here he spread out pleading hands and looked at them with a faint smile, and with his head on one side—“if it were possible for me to have a little liqueur; I am of a faintness that is unusual; I have worked a long time for this thing—and it is done!”

Miss Dorcas hurried away and came back with a little glass filled with brandy. Vasserot cocked an eye at it whimsically and extended it before him; brought it back with a sweep of his arm to his lips.

"I drink," he said, "to the little Michael—the little master!"

It was a matter of stern business the next morning. The good Gustave could scarcely eat his breakfast, although he managed to prove a fairly good trencherman in a very short space of time. Then, without apology, he rose from his chair and beckoned imperiously to Michael.

"You rest yourself, little master, for half an hour—lying on your back and breathing quietly, with even movements; and no one shall speak to him. I, that made his voice, say this thing—and I will be obeyed!"

They went about the house softly, conscious that the wondrous boy lay on his back on the drawing-room couch—breathing. Miss Dorcas, getting a glimpse of Vasserot, saw that he was sternly and frowningly going through a business of moving his fingers, and seemingly endeavoring to pull them asunder. Priscilla, clattering hurriedly downstairs, was checked by horrified whispers, and compelled, greatly to her amazement, to change her shoes.

And then presently subdued voices in the drawing-room, and the first chords on the piano. Three women waited outside in the little hall and listened; and then the voice fell in softly with the music—and rose—and rose; until they looked at each other with wet eyes, and with smiles. Now and then Vasserot's harsh voice broke in impatiently, and the notes thundered a little; they wondered what he could find to complain about.

It went on day after day; and now and then there was an audience. It was when Flora Fielding rang

the bell in the ordinary course, while a rehearsal was in progress, that Vasserot, stopping everything suddenly and knocking over the piano-stool, proclaimed to her and to any future audience that the ringing of bells was not and could not and never should be permitted. Flora Fielding crept meekly into the dining-room, and listened, and only spoke in whispers.

All one long afternoon was given up to the arranging of the programme. Vasserot sprawled himself on a chair at the little old-fashioned dainty desk that stood in the window; and scrawled, and scored out, and muttered, while Michael walked up and down the room, and now and then flung a suggestion over his shoulder. And torn and blotted sheets of the neat note-paper, with the neat monogram in the corner, that had lain in the desk for years, and was only used on very rare occasions by Miss Dorcas or Miss Betsy, were picked up in heaps afterwards by Priscilla and carried away.

Vasserot came down Little Place one afternoon with a roll of paper in his hand; he beat time with it as he walked. He came into the little drawing-room and demanded at once, with a dramatic wave of the roll of paper—where was the boy?

“Where is the little Michael?” he asked.

Michael came in and joined the group. Vasserot suddenly flung open the roll of paper, and stood with it spread out for all to see; and they crowded before it, watching open-eyed.

It was the poster. There was the name of the hall, and the date of the concert—and the name of Michael Doran. And in the middle of the sheet, in profile,

was the face of the boy, with eyes turned a little upwards.

"It is wonderful," breathed Miss Dorcas.

"And so like dear Michael," whispered Miss Betsy.

"But who," asked Stella, "is Miss Celestine Wilde?"

"She will sing also," said Vasserot, abruptly. "She is a good singer—after a fashion; also she is known as a singer, and the public have for her a certain liking. You could not expect," he added, with an indulgent smile, "that the little master should sing all the evening. It is an impossibility. There will, as you read here, be the three of us; the good Gustave, who will play—the Miss Celestine Wilde, who will sing; a contralto of fair quality, though not of the first rate; but a voice serviceable. And lastly"—he spread out a hand, and smiled—"the little master, whom no one has yet heard. They will tolerate the good Gustave, and will make remarks concerning his ugliness; they will listen to the creditable voice of the good Celestine; and then—the little Michael! I say no more."

He said a great deal more, one way and the other; also he fixed up the poster on the wall of the drawing-room, where it looked incongruous enough. Nor did he display any great surprise, nor, indeed, anything but complacency, when Stella, coming in breathless one day, announced that she had seen the poster on a boarding, and also on the Tube station; moreover, she had actually seen people looking at it.

"It is expected of them that they shall look," was Vasserot's comment.

The Major was told by Flora Fielding; and he let off a succession of "God bless us!"—and "What next?"

in his amazement. Moreover, the Major, having nothing to do, was able to go and see one of the posters for himself; he stood before it for quite a long time, half inclined to turn to any unknown passer-by and inform all and sundry casually that he knew this young man quite well. And, from looking at the poster, the Major naturally drifted back to Little Place, and rang the bell at No. 3.

It happened that a rehearsal was just nearing completion, so that Vasserot merely ground his teeth at the sound of the bell, and played a little more strenuously; while the Major, confronted with horrified looks and fingers on lips, was ushered, in ludicrous tip-toe fashion, into the dining-room.

“What’s it all about?” he whispered huskily, when the door of the room closed.

“Michael is practicing,” whispered the sisters in one breath.

“Oh!” The Major looked properly impressed as he glanced at the closed door. “I saw the bill affair; he’s good-looking, in a way.”

“He’s very handsome,” said Miss Betsy.

“I dessay—I dessay,” assented the Major. “If he can really sing, I wouldn’t mind springing half a crown for a cheap seat. Half a guinea is a devil of a lot for singing; they charge as much as that for the stalls at a theater—and there you get a whole play.”

“Our nephew is a very wonderful singer—and one must necessarily pay a great deal to hear him,” said Miss Dorcas, stiffly.

At that moment the door was opened, and Vasserot and Michael came in together. The big man had an

arm flung affectionately round the boy's shoulders; he was even smiling.

"The little master has acquitted himself well this afternoon; he is a very good little boy," said Vasserot. "Only once did I find my temper rise; and that was not with him; it was when some imbecile rang the bell."

"I rang the bell just now, sir," said the Major.

"Then you should have restrained yourself, and waited on the doorstep until the music was finished," said Vasserot, calmly. "Never in all my life has it occurred to me to be in a house where there is so much ringing of bells; it is as though it were done as a little amusement.

Michael was duly presented to the Major, who bowed stiffly, and looked the boy up and down disapprovingly. "I saw your picture just now—stuck up on a boarding," said the Major.

"You will see many such, if you go to look for them," said Vasserot. "And presently—mark you this well"—he wagged his forefinger in front of his face—"presently you shall see many more of them—and in the picture papers and elsewhere. Also you shall hear the name very, very often in many ways. Do you come to the concert?"

"Well—I thought of taking a half-crown ticket," said the Major a little grudgingly, as he rattled his money in his pockets.

"We shall not take from you the little half-crown; you may keep him," said Vasserot, grandly. "If you will go with these ladies I shall be happy to provide you with tickets. It is our desire to see the friends of the little Michael at the concert that evening."

So the Major went away with a ticket—blessing his soul all the way along Little Place at the wonder of the thing.

Day by day there crept into the house a little, meek, timid wisp of a woman, who was closeted with the sisters for an hour or so at a time, and who was understood to be a dressmaker. She was one of those dressmakers with no ideas of her own, save to do exactly as she was told by clients, who for the most part bullied and snubbed her with impunity. The little ladies did not bully, nor did they snub; they made her task easier by suggesting with smiles that they were too old to change now; which meant that the fashion that had been a fashion once, years and years before, should be their fashion still. After a great deal of debate they decided that it would be best, perhaps, for Miss Dorcas to cling to black, as she had always done; Miss Betsy felt that she might as well, after all, remain faithful to gray.

The great day dawned. Miss Betsy, awakening early, and feeling an extra heart-beat at the remembrance that this really was the day, wondered if Michael had slept well. As a matter of fact, Michael had slept dreamlessly, and was still sleeping.

Vasserot came down from that upper room on tip-toe, and with a stern finger on his lips.

“This morning he rests himself for as long as he likes,” was his dictum. “This day, ladies, he belongs to me, and no one else goes near him even for a moment. Presently I shall take to him a little food—I alone, and no one else. Much depends upon this day; the little Michael is in my hands.

There was no rehearsal that day; all that could be

done had been done already. The boy lay idly on the couch in the drawing-room, reading, for the most part; and every now and then the sisters would make an excuse—one or other of them—to creep in and look at him; and smile at him gently, and creep away again; much as though he had been ill, but was now happily recovering.

Gustave Vasserot, like a big, awkward, ugly mother, hovered over the boy all day; and Michael obeyed in everything. In the afternoon Vasserot insisted that he should go to bed, and should sleep. There was the very faint rumbling—the mere murmur of a coming storm for a moment or two; but the stronger will prevailed, and the boy, with a shrug of the shoulders, went off meekly enough. All the house was hushed, and a deeper silence even than usual reigned in it. Miss Betsy had posted herself at the drawing-room window to watch the street; so that, at the mere approach of anyone determined to lay hands upon the bell, she might rush out and open the door herself.

Vasserot had crept up to the room where Michael was sleeping. He opened the door and went in softly; closed the door, and stood looking at the sleeper for a long time, with his arms folded.

“How will it be, my little one?” he whispered to himself presently. “Will it happen that you shall go up—and up and up—and forget the poor Gustave down below? You are a strange little Michael; so much of the gentle dead mother—and just a little—or perhaps more than a little—of the father who was no good. I wonder if the prayers of the little mother who is in heaven shall prevail—and you shall be a

very, very great man. Ah!—we shall see—we shall see."

True to that determination that the boy should be his that day, Vasserot declared that he would take him to the hall; they would go alone together. The little ladies would have protested; it would be so much nicer for them all to go together; but a look at the stern face of Vasserot decided them to say nothing. So that the party was made up quite irrespective of Vasserot and Michael, who would presently go down together in a taxi-cab.

The little ladies had put on their new dresses, preening themselves a little over the business; they had kept one surprise till the very last—and that surprise a delightful one. Stella came into the room in a new dress; for this great occasion she was in white. Even the timid little dressmaker had not been able to spoil the girl's daintiness; she looked beautiful.

Neither Miss Dorcas nor Miss Betsy had ever been in a taxi-cab in their lives; nothing should ever induce them to enter such a vehicle. There was an ancient man whom they had occasionally employed, and who jobbed out a few staggering old horses and carriages—driving one himself always, and employing a few men almost as ancient as he was. From this individual two vehicles had been ordered, and in due course they arrived at the door.

"Much more respectable," said Miss Dorcas, as she peeped through the drawing-room window. "It almost looks as though one had one's own."

It had been arranged that the Major should escort Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy; Stella was to ride with Mrs. Fielding and Jimmie. At the last moment Stella

came shyly into the room where the boy was standing; Vasserot was impatiently walking away down Little Place in search of a taxi-cab. Stella went straight up to Michael and held out her hands.

"Cousin Michael," she said, in her soft voice—"I think you know all the good I wish you; all my heart is with you. As Mr. Vasserot says—to-night you will sing like the angels."

"Thank you, Cousin Stella," he whispered, squeezed her hands, and turned quickly away.

Jimmie was calling from the pavement. The girl ran out, and was assisted into the cab; the two vehicles drove away. In a few minutes Vasserot came back in a taxi-cab, leaning out of the window and yelling to the man; the vehicle drew up with a jerk at No. 3. Michael came out and got in; the cab turned and went off. There was only Priscilla at the window, looking out, and wondering a little what it all meant.

At the concert-hall the Major was wonderful. The Major was furious with a menial who could not instantly tell them where their seats were; he calmed down a little when he discovered that they were quite good seats, and fairly comfortable. He secured programmes; and he glared round about him with the air of one who had taken the hall for that evening and was very graciously permitting a few people to come in and sit near him. Miss Dorcas, having removed a filmy lace shawl from her head, glanced round behind her.

"There are not many people yet," she said.

"I expect a lot more will come presently," murmured Miss Betsy.

Other people began to drift in; Miss Dorcas, looking about her with bright, alert eyes, noticed one or two tired-looking men come in, and take programmes without tendering any money for them; they seemed to murmur some magic word to the attendants. The tired-looking men seemed to know each other, for they nodded, and in one or two instances stood at the side of the hall for a little time, with heads inclined toward each other, whispering.

And then Vasserot came quickly on to the platform, resplendent in evening dress, and bowed low, and seated himself at the piano. For a moment he went through that business of rubbing his fingers together, and striving to pull them out of their sockets; then he shook back his mane of hair and began to play.

It did not seem in the least to matter what he played; they were waiting for something else. When he rose from the piano, and bent himself almost in half, so that his long hair fell over his eyes, the little ladies applauded decorously; the Major thumped the ferule of his stick on the floor. And Vasserot went off, and there was a wait.

Two of the tired-looking men were sitting immediately behind Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy. Amid a little murmuring of voices in the hall one of these men leaned across to the other and tapped his programme with a finger nail.

“It seems incredible that anyone who knows anything in these days should sing the ‘Prize Lied’—as a beginning. If he wants to have any chance at all, why on earth didn’t he get something new; we could have said something about him then.”

"Ambition, I suppose he'd call it," said the other. "I think I shall give it another name when I write about him. He won't need many lines, I'm thinking."

Then suddenly Vasserot walked on to the platform. He did not bow this time; he seated himself quickly at the piano.

The sisters caught each other's hands and held tight. Stella clasped her hands in her lap and watched breathlessly. There was a pause, and then Michael Doran walked on to the platform. Although he bowed, he did not seem to see anyone; he walked like a man in a dream. He fixed his eyes right above their heads. The face of Gustave Vasserot—ugly and distorted as it always seemed—was white as death as he struck the first notes.

CHAPTER IX

STELLA COMES TO LIFE

It was all over. Even the people who had lingered to the last, in the hope that the boy would yet again appear, had gone reluctantly away. Michael was seated in a corner of the artists' room, with his face hidden in his hands; he seemed to be trembling. The last of those who had crowded in to see this new wonder had gone, and the only people in the room were the little group from Little Place, Hampstead, and Miss Celestine Wilde.

It had been a wonderful night. Even Vasserot, who had been torn and rent by varying emotions for some two and a half hours, acknowledged that to himself, as he stood leaning against the wall with his arms folded. As for the little ladies, it seemed as though they would never have done talking.

It had begun with that singing of the "Prize Lied," which coincided with a sudden and extraordinary wakefulness on the part of the tired-looking critics who had not paid for their programmes. As the extraordinary voice began, Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy had been conscious of a stirring in the seats behind them and round about them; as Flora Fielding described it afterwards, people sat up and gaped. And when the last notes had died away, and while Vas-

serot still sat, white-faced and erect, at the piano, there was a silence that seemed long drawn out; and then a sudden tumult of applause. Vasserot had known in his own mind that it would be like that; he would have been puzzled and perhaps a little afraid if the applause had begun at once.

Michael was recalled again and again; and finally sang a little dainty lilting thing that called forth laughter that was like to tears.

Miss Celestine Wilde, being well known, had been received with the courteous applause and attention that was her due. She was a tall, handsome woman, with a certain insolent, languorous grace about her; she sang perfectly, but with absolutely no intelligence and no heart. As she and the boy waited together, while Vasserot was playing on the platform—the boy very still, with his great dark eyes seeming to be distended—Celestine Wilde looked at him, and spoke in her curiously languid voice.

“Where did you come from?”

Michael looked at her quickly, and laughed, and shrugged his shoulders. “Oh—from nowhere—from anywhere,” he answered. “Vasserot found me.”

She gave him a long look. “I suppose it’s not necessary to tell you how wonderful you are?”

“You are very kind,” he stammered.

“Oh, no—I’m not,” she said. “My decent, average contralto, with a lot of training, enables me to get a living—just this sort of thing, and with luck a minor part at the opera; there it ends. I wonder just a little how far you’ll go?”

“I’m glad—glad that you liked my singing,” he said, with his little quick bow.

"Don't be foolish, Mr. Doran," she said quickly. "You know quite well that I did more than that. It's no question of liking your singing; I am filled with wonder at the glory of your voice. Please remember that I've heard 'em all—the fat brutes that manage to scrape up to C by wriggling and shouting and squeaking and standing on their toes—with their neck muscles swelling till you'd think they'd burst. And then—you! You stand still and breathe—and what a volume of sound it is."

"It's all due to Vasserot," said Michael, modestly; but he was pleased, nevertheless.

"The great Vasserot has known what to do with you—but the voice and the throat were from the beginning," she said, with a confident nod. "Now, go on again, little wonder man; I'm enjoying myself this evening."

And so it had gone on until the end. And at the end, when he had bowed again and again, and so had at last escaped from the platform, all sorts of people had come crowding up to see him. The tired-looking men had been among the first; there was some competition among them to have a few notes as to what he had done before, and where he had been, and where he had studied. And Vasserot had stood quite calmly listening, while Michael told them that it was all Vasserot—and Vasserot yet again—and still more Vasserot. There had never been anyone else.

And when at last they had gone, he had suddenly dropped into a chair, and covered his face with his hands; it had all been a little too much for him.

Celestine Wilde stood looking at him for a moment as she slipped on her cloak; she laughed, with a cer-

tain tenderness in her eyes. "What a child!—and what an artist!" she said.

The Major was walking up and down the room, talking hard. "Seems to have been a great success," he said. "I suppose we shall have a bit about it in the papers to-morrow, if it's only a line or two."

"Sir," said Vasserot, with a sudden desperate calmness, and walking up to him, and looking down into his round red face—"you are really a very great imbecile!" He walked away before the astounded Major had time to frame a reply.

While they stood a little apart from the boy, Celestine stepped slowly across to where he sat, and laid a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right," she said, in her deep voice. "It's all right."

Michael looked up at her; his lips were quivering, but his eyes smiled. He got quickly to his feet, and looked about him like one dazed.

"I'm a little upset with it all," he said; "everybody has been so kind to me—you—very kind indeed. You see—this is the first time."

"The first of many, my friend," she said easily. "Look here; this is my card; I wish you'd come and see me. Only just for a cup of tea; and I'm artist enough not to ask you to sing to me. Will you come?"

"I shall be delighted," he said, as he slipped the card into his pocket.

Vasserot went to find a cab for her; they seemed to be talking hard as they went. Suddenly Michael, who had been pacing up and down the room, turned, and looked about him as if in search of someone.

"I want Stella," he said quickly.

Jimmie Fielding made a movement, but the girl

came quickly to Michael's side. "What is it, Michael?" she asked quickly.

"I want you, please, to come home with me," he said. He had taken her hand, and was holding it, and gently smoothing her fingers; he did not look into her eyes. "I'm very tired—and I need you badly to-night. I don't want anyone else; I simply want you—and you only."

Stella glanced round at Miss Dorcas, with an unspoken question in her eyes.

"Certainly, my dear," said Miss Dorcas—"if he wishes it."

Jimmie Fielding stepped slowly forward, until he stood so close to the girl as almost to touch her; his face was alternately flushing and paling. "I rather wanted to take Stella home," he said, in his heavy voice. "I expect Mr. Doran will be waiting for Vasserot. I can take care of Stella."

Michael drew himself up; and even then his height seemed a long way below that of the big figure of Jimmie. "I tell you that I am going home with Stella," he said, with a sudden flush in his face. "It is necessary; I do not want to talk to anyone else to-night. You understand—don't you, Stella?"

The girl looked distressed at being the center of such a little scene; she glanced helplessly from one to the other. But her eyes were chiefly for the boy who still held her hand and was now looking at her appealingly.

"Yes—of course I understand," she said at last. And then to Jimmie in a lower tone, as she stretched at arms' length away from Michael, who still clung

to her fingers—"Can't you see that he's upset, with all this excitement. I must look after him."

"I can't see why we can't all go home in the same way as we came," said Jimmie, obstinately, in a voice loud enough to be heard by them all. "I'll take you and mother back again, just as I brought you."

Michael suddenly released her fingers and turned away. "Then I do not go home at all," he said. "Or if I go home it will be when and how I choose—and alone. I'll walk about the streets for an hour or two. No one does anything to help me."

"And what is this?" broke in a huge voice; and Vasserot forced his way unceremoniously into the little group. "Who is this that is disturbing the little Michael? I demand it!"

"It doesn't matter," said the boy, without looking at him.

"Ah—but does it not matter?" almost shouted Vasserot. "I demand to know what all this is. Michael—you shall not speak; let another tell me."

"Michael says he is tired, and he would like me to go home with him," said Stella.

"I do not go home with anyone else," said the boy, quietly.

"And why not?" cried Vasserot, spreading out his hands, and looking threateningly from one face to another. "If the little master demands anything tonight—it is his. Am I understood?"

"Very well—it doesn't matter to me," said Jimmie, and turned away.

Vasserot helped the boy on with his coat; and Miss Dorcas tenderly wrapped up Stella. Michael was all smiles again now; he slipped the girl's hand through

his arm and began to lead her away. At the door he turned, swinging her round for a moment; they had made a little lane for him and Stella, down which they had walked.

“Dear people all,” he said, standing hat in hand, and bowing—“you have all been sweet and kind to me to-night; from my heart I thank you. We meet again presently.”

They passed out together, leaving the others looking after them. Vasserot closed the door, and, standing in the midst of the little group, made a final announcement to the sisters and to the others generally.

“Dear people—dear ladies—said I not that the thing was accomplished? You shall watch your newspapers to-morrow morning, and for other to-morrow mornings. For myself, I go to the agent—the great man who does all these things—to-morrow morning; it has come about that he has sought me with some eagerness; it is no longer necessary that I should set my legs running after him. All that is changed.”

Meanwhile Michael had hailed a taxi and had helped the girl in, and had followed her. He sank back wearily as the vehicle started, and closed his eyes. When presently he began to speak, for a little time he did not open them.

“It is very, very good to have you near me to-night, little Stella. Always I have known, in moments like this, exactly the person I wanted to have near me. Do you know what it is to be filled with half a dozen—half a hundred emotions and feelings all at once—to be drunk with them—so that you don’t know whether you would like to laugh or to

cry, or to shriek or to swear? No—of course you wouldn't know that; but that's just what I felt like to-night. Even Vasserot was excited."

"It was all very wonderful," murmured Stella.

He sat up and opened his eyes. "It was all very wonderful; but now we will forget all about it," he said astonishingly. "Little Stella—there is a perfume about you—nothing that one can distinguish—but just the perfume of freshness. I can't see your eyes in this dark cab, but I know that they are smiling at me—just in that kind, tender way that they always smile. Do you like me better to-night even than before?"

"I think I do—if that is possible," she said. "To-night has made such a difference, Michael. All those people applauding, and standing up and calling out to you; you are quite another Michael to-night."

He took the little gloved hand that lay on her knee nearest to him, and held it; then he gently separated the fingers, and lightly kissed them one by one. He looked up at her, and his eyes were shining.

"Never another Michael to you, little Stella," he said. "I am always the same Michael. Whatever happens to me—in all the wonderful days and all the wonderful years that Vasserot says are coming to me—I shall always be just the same to you. Do you believe that?"

"I like to believe it," she whispered. "It is nice to believe it."

"If all that Vasserot says about me comes true I shall be"—he shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his hands in that little foreign way he had—"just a voice. All sorts of people will say all sorts of things

about me; they will write things about me, and talk foolishness about me. And they won't be talking about Michael Doran—not the Michael you know—but just about a voice greater than any they have ever heard. Will you remember that?"

She was silent for a moment or two, looking down at the little hand he held. "You mean," she said at last, "that the Michael I know is to be something different from the Michael everyone else knows?"

"You dear!" he exclaimed impulsively. "I knew you'd understand. I have heard of great men who lived in the glare and the glitter and in the sound of applause always; and the great world knew all about them—or thought it did. And all the time they had a little nest—a little heart into which they could creep, and lie hidden safely and securely; while the world roared past them, and still shouted that it knew where they were, and all about them. And the man, lying hidden, laughed softly to himself at the thought that he had escaped."

He sat for a long time looking out of the window of the vehicle; at last he asked quite abruptly, "Where are we now?"

"We're getting near home," answered the girl. "We shall be there a long time before auntie's slow old cab arrives."

"Then let us stop, and get out and walk," he said. "The night is fine and dry; and I want you all to myself for a little time longer, before we have to go into the house and find ourselves among all the lights and the voices."

He leaned out of the window and called impatiently to the driver; paid the man, and stood for a moment

on the pavement beside the girl as the taxi drove away. There was no one about, and he turned to her with a smile, and held out his hand.

“Come, sweet little canary; fly away with me, and be my guide; I stand lost, and you only know the way.”

She laughed, and started off at a great rate, the boy still clinging to her hand. After a moment or two, as he dragged her back, she waited, and they went on at a more sober pace, arm-in-arm.

“So you like the little Michael, as Gustave always calls me, a little better because he has sung to you, and because all sorts of people have applauded him—eh?” he said presently. “But you must not like him for that; you must like him for other things—as I have explained. Do you know why I demanded that you should go home with me to-night?”

“Because—I suppose—that you liked me,” was the breathless answer.

“Yes—and because I needed you. I could not have gone home with Vasserot—talking and exclaiming all the way; I wanted to get away from everything. Above all, little Stella, I wanted to be with someone who had liked me—that was the word you used)—before she ever heard me sing at all. I am not the voice to you to-night, little Stella; I am only Michael.”

“I shall never think of you without hearing your voice,” she said. “But I am glad to think that you put me in a place apart; it is nice to know that. I wonder if you will always do that—if you will always turn to me as to someone that is not like everyone else?”

They had come out on the Heath; they stood there

in the moonlight, with the shadows of trees about them. They were so young, and the boy had soared that night far above Stella's ordinary mental vision. She had never known anyone but Jimmie Fielding—Jimmie the faithful, who had bullied her when he had been an awkward boy, and who had loved her when she grew older. And she had been so glad of love in her starved life.

“Vasserot says that I shall be a very great man,” he went on; “but that will not matter to you, little Stella. It is only Michael you will know—Michael who loves you. I told you when first I saw you how much I longed for beauty in my life; how much beautiful things always moved me. There is nothing like you in all the world, little Stella; you shall be the little quiet heart into which I shall creep and hide myself when I am tired—just as I am tired to-night. You will be different from all the rest of the world; and you will always belong to me. I know that I shall need you, and shall love you, more than I shall need and love anyone else in all the big world.”

“Are you sure?” she whispered. “When you go out into the big world, and people say of you the things they must say—will you forget?”

“I cannot forget,” he answered, as he took her into his arms. “I could not have sung as I sang to-night if I had not seen you and known that you were there; you are necessary to me—a part of me. I love you, little Stella. Have you nothing to say to me—on this first great night of my life?”

“You are more wonderful than anyone I have ever known,” she answered. “How could I help loving you, Michael?”

And Jimmie Fielding, sitting in the slowly-jolting cab with his mother, stared out of the window, and wondered which way they had gone, and what exactly they might be saying to each other at that moment. Incidentally Jimmie wished a little miserably that he was able to sing; he saw himself up on a platform, breathing out wondrous sounds—with little Stella looking up at him with humbly-adoring eyes—just as she had looked that night at somebody else.

CHAPTER X

SINGING BIRDS AND SNARES

PRISCILLA having received instructions to wait up, and being, in any case, in no mood for slumber with her ladies dressed up and gone out—"all the street rushing about"—as Priscilla put it—that discreet maid opened the door when the Major rang the bell. So watchful had she been, that the Major's hand had not left the bell before the door was opened.

Everybody crowded in, because there were sandwiches and decanters and glasses set out in the dining-room. Miss Dorcas had asked that everyone would look in for five minutes before going home. As they crossed the threshold, with everyone chatting at the same time, Miss Dorcas put a startled question—

"Why—where's Stella and Michael?"

They had not arrived. The wondering Priscilla could vouch for it that the party now assembled in the dining-room were the first-comers; no one else had been near the house.

"They started long before us—and they had a taxi," said Major Pennykid.

"I expect they'll be here directly," said Miss Betsy, a little nervously.

"Horses for me always," said Mrs. Fielding, who

was a little cross, having had Jimmie for a partner on the drive home, and having been unable to extract a word from him. "Those taxis are always breaking down."

"I'm sure she's quite safe with Michael," said Miss Betsy. "Will you help yourself, Major?"

Just then the bell rang again. They all waited expectantly; but they heard no voices. And then the door was opened quietly, and Stella came in, followed by Michael. All eyes were instantly turned upon them.

"We were afraid that something had happened to you," said Miss Dorcas. "Did you have a breakdown?"

"No, aunt," said Stella, in a faint voice, as she bent down over a plate of sandwiches.

"It was a beautiful night, and the cab jolted; we agreed to walk part of the way. I couldn't keep still," said Michael. "What's become of Vasserot?"

No one seemed to know what had become of Vasserot; they pictured him, in a state of great excitement, walking the whole way back to Little Place with great strides. But presently the bell rang again, and he literally swept into the room, thrusting people out of the way, and pounced upon the sandwiches. In the very act of cramming one into his mouth, he poured spirits into a glass with the other hand, and mixed soda-water with it.

"I am of a hunger that is colossal," he exclaimed, with his mouth full, as he beamed round upon everyone. "I have taken the agent person to a hotel, and have given him good stuff to drink; also I have smoked with the agent person—who is a very good

fellow, mark you, now that he knows what I have to sell to him. Oh, yes—a very good fellow indeed."

"It seems to have been a very great success," said Miss Dorcas. "And all the people seemed to like it—didn't they?"

Vasserot threw back his head and laughed; looked solemnly at Miss Dorcas, and laughed again. Then he emptied his glass and set it down; and leaned toward her a little roguishly. Excitement and brandy, to which he was not accustomed, had had their way with him.

"Oh, yes—of a certainty they liked it. So well did they like it, that you shall see your newspapers to-morrow morning, and they shall tell you. So well did they like it, that the agent person, who finds it difficult and inadvisable ever to get excited about anything, is of a great excitement to-night. To-night the agent person loves me like a brother, and will send prayers about me up to heaven."

"Was he pleased?" asked Michael, quickly. "Was he satisfied?"

"I go to him to-morrow at eleven o'clock to arrange with him for an immediate concert on a larger scale," said Vasserot, brusquely. "It is to be managed somehow, even if others have to be thrust aside. Leave all that to your Gustave; it is not for you to talk business, my little one."

"The happiest and most wonderful night of my life!" whispered the boy to Stella. And she smiled at him with a deep, tender look which seemed to say that it was the most wonderful night in her life too.

They stood round the table, and everyone seemed

to be talking at once—save perhaps Jimmie. When presently Michael had moved away from her, and was laughingly teasing Miss Betsy about her new dress, Jimmie contrived to get next to where Stella was standing. In a furtive fashion he touched her hand, so that she started and looked up at him.

"I had been looking forward to coming home with you," said Jimmie—"because then *we* might have got out and walked a little way—mightn't *we*?"

The girl glanced across the room at Michael, and then answered the pleading voice of the other man without looking up at him. "To-night he had need of me; I was proud to think that I could help him," she said, in a mere whisper. "And we couldn't very well have got out of the cab—you and I—and allowed your mother to come back alone. And Michael and I had a lot to talk about."

She turned away, and moved across to where Miss Dorcas was standing; and slipped her hand through her aunt's arm, as though to seek refuge there. Jimmie stood looking at her steadily, wishing now that he had said nothing at all, but had left the matter alone. After all, he was making a great deal out of what was only a very small business.

The Major, without being asked, helped himself again, coming up to that indiscretion with much talking, as though he did the thing unconsciously. Twice Mrs. Fielding said that they really must be going—and just look at the time!—and still no one thought of moving at all. Indeed, it was only when the Major, having got all he could to drink and to eat, pulled out his watch, and compared it with the heavy old clock on the mantelpiece, and exclaimed—

“God bless us!—one o’clock!”—that everyone seemed to cry out in dismay at once, and to begin to make preparations for departure.

Never in all its quiet history had Little Place been so noisy before, and at such an hour. For the Major insisted on shaking hands with Vasserot, and assuring him that although he—the Major—had no real ear for music, but had once performed on the concertina in his subaltern days, yet he was perfectly certain that Vasserot was a devilish good fellow; any time that he cared to stretch his legs as far as the end of Little Place he would find a bachelor’s welcome and a glass of good stuff. The Major came back twice to say that.

The door being left open while all this went on, Jimmie Fielding, hovering unhappily outside, saw a little scene going on at the end of the hall. Stella was going upstairs; and she had paused three steps up to look down at Michael. The boy stood there, slim and smiling; as she stretched down a hand to him, and bent so that she almost touched his face, he kissed the hand, and then let it go. Three or four steps further up the girl turned coquettishly and kissed her finger-tips to him; and then disappeared up the dark staircase. Jimmie walked away a few steps down Little Place.

Vasserot and Michael were left together in the dining-room while the sisters went off upstairs. Miss Betsy went for a moment into Miss Dorcas’s room, and stood there, pulling off her black gloves carefully.

“What do you think made them so late to-night, dear?” asked Miss Betsy.

“Oh—they’re very young,” said Miss Dorcas.

"Can't you see him just telling the cabman to stop, and getting out, and walking away with her—anywhere?"

"Yes—I suppose it would be like that," said Miss Betsy, in a murmur.

"And after all Michael is very wonderful," said Miss Dorcas. "I think we've all been swept off our feet a little to-night. We didn't realize what he was like or what he could do. He's so alive—he's so much something—I can't express it—something that has come into our lives, and shaken us all up. You can't wonder that Stella should be swept off her feet too—can you?"

"Things happen so quickly," said poor Miss Betsy, with a shake of the head. "It seems only a day or two ago that I thought that Stella and Jimmie—"

"Poor old Jimmie!" said Miss Dorcas, with a little laugh. "He's the best fellow that ever lived; and when I see him look at Stella sometimes it makes my heart ache. But the other one—oh, yes—I think he's swept us all off our feet."

At an hour when no one else was stirring, Vasserot went out of the house next morning, in search for newspapers; he came back with a sheaf of them under his arm, like a sort of over-grown newsboy. When, later, the sisters came down to breakfast, they found him surrounded with piles of newspapers, all turned and twisted about; he was hacking paragraphs out of them with a knife from the breakfast-table. As they entered, a little aghast at the litter, he did not even look up, nor answer their morning greetings.

"They are shaken to their insides!" he said at last, nodding over one paragraph which he had jagged out

of a paper. “‘Perfection!’—oh, yes—I should think so indeed! ‘A jaded and oft-disappointed critic says emphatically that this is the purest and most wonderful voice heard in London—or indeed anywhere else—for very many years.’ And indeed I believe you, good jaded one! ‘Carried a small audience by storm; one may see him in the future carrying away greater audiences. The wonderful voice is quite flawless and of remarkable power.’ That is owing to the good Gustave entirely; the good Gustave thanks you. ‘Added to all this, the poetic beauty of the young inspired face rendered the whole performance a more than remarkable one. If London does not flock to hear this young singer—’ Oh, yes, it is for London to do all that—and for the whole world afterwards!”

“Is there really something about Michael in the papers?” asked Miss Betsy.

The man looked up at her with a sort of pitying wonder; rose to his feet, and kicked the rumpled papers in a heap under the table, and flapped before her eyes the jagged cuttings he held. “There is a very great deal in the newspapers—and much of it is about Michael. They have not such asses’ heads upon them as I had once thought—these critic persons; there is a brain or two still left amongst them. They say more even than I had hoped, and I had hoped a great deal.”

Over breakfast, when Michael had joined them, Vasserot read out the paragraphs, with much commenting and many gestures. The paragraphs were certainly wonderful; and Michael sat there, eating very little, but listening eagerly to the recital concerning his beauty, and his voice, and the general

impression he had made. Stella looked at him all the time, and never at Vasserot; as for Michael, he had his eyes fixed on the ugly face, and saw nothing else while Vasserot talked.

Finally Vasserot tucked the slips away in his pocket, and announced his intention of going down to see the agent. "We shall laugh when we think of last night in a little time to come," he affirmed. "We shall laugh with much heartiness over that little beginning."

The boy was restless, as he ever was under the strain of excitement; after walking about from one room to another for a little time, he suddenly took up his hat, and decided to go out. He did not even mention to anyone that he was going; after a moment or two of hesitation, while he stood in the little hall with his hat in his hand, he suddenly clapped it on, and opened the door and went out. As he reached the pavement he saw a hesitating figure standing there; a half glance showed him that it was Jimmie. Michael nodded a little curtly, and walked away.

He was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he did not notice that Jimmie, after hesitating vaguely for a moment, had set off after him. It was only when Michael had walked quite a long way, and had at last seated himself on a bench on the Heath, that he became aware that someone was standing in front of him; and, looking up with a start, saw the other man. He had a vague feeling that he had seen Jimmie a little time before; he wondered what the man wanted.

"There's something I should like to say to you,"

said Jimmie, heavily. "I've been making up my mind to say it as we came along."

"Oh—you followed me? I'm sorry to have made you walk so far," said Michael, with his pleasant smile. "Won't you sit down?" He touched the seat beside him as he spoke.

"Thank you—but I talk better when I stand," said the other. Somewhat disconcertingly, he walked round the end of the seat, and leaned on the back rail of it. Michael twisted round sideways, the better to look at him.

"You've only been living up our way a very little time, Doran," said Jimmie at last—"and I've lived there all my life. I'm not good at talking, but I want you to get that fact into your mind. I've been there even longer than Stella has; I can remember when Stella first came."

"But I knew all this before," said Michael, quickly. "Stella told me all about it herself."

"I've grown up with Stella, in a way, ever since she was a baby," went on the patient voice. "I've known her through long years, when she's lived in that quiet house with those two elderly ladies, and with never a soul else—except me—to talk to. In the old days she has told me her little troubles, and I've done my best, in a blundering fashion, to smooth them away for her. I've seen her grow from little short frocks to longer frocks, and to longer yet. I want you, Doran, to understand all that clearly."

"I understand it, and it is all very nice and very beautiful," said the other, looking at Jimmie out of his bright dark eyes.

"After a time, when she grew up, I got to love her

—very dearly. Men don't talk about these things to each other as a rule; they only think about 'em. And one night, just before you came there, I told her —just told her that I loved her."

"And what did she say?" asked Michael, quietly.

"She gave me to understand that she loved me in return," said Jimmie. "And I know that she did love me then; I know that, without our knowing it, there had been a sort of understanding between us ever since she had grown up."

The boy was very silent for a time; he sat with his fingers drumming on his knees, and his eyes gazing past the other man down the long road. Presently he turned his head quickly, and said—"Do you mean that you're engaged?"

"Well—that's what it amounts to," said Jimmie, after a thoughtful pause. "She didn't want anyone to be told about it just at present; it was to be our secret—just between ourselves. But I want you to understand that she belongs to me."

Michael rose to his feet, and moved away a step or two; it gave him the appearance of preparing for emergencies. After shifting about restlessly on his feet once or twice, he looked at the man at the other side of the seat, and spoke.

"I'm afraid not," he said. "She belongs to me."

"I don't believe that," said Jimmie, with a sudden darkening of his face. "I happened to see you last night, kissing her hand, or some tomfoolery like that; that brought me out here to talk to you about it. I ought to be down at work; but work'll keep. I thought I'd like to speak to you about this thing before it goes any further."

"It cannot go any further," said Michael, quietly. "It was last night that I spoke to her; I tell you that she belongs to me. And more than that," he added, with sudden heat, "no one shall take her away from me. She's my mate—my everything. How can you understand what love is like?"

"Oh, pretty well, I fancy," said Jimmie, with a little quick laugh. "I can understand what it means for there to be one person in the wide world, and only one person; I know what it means to feel that you'd go through hell itself for her, if necessary, and wouldn't think twice about it. I can't make good speeches, and I find it difficult to say all that's inside me. I often think that's rather funny," he added inconsequently, "because, you see, I'm in a newspaper office, and ought to be able to express myself rather well. As a matter of fact, though, they only give me the stodgy, heavy stuff to write—solid stuff, you know."

"You're getting away from things a bit," said Michael. "I don't yet know what it is you have to say to me."

"I'll put it in a sentence then," said the other, coming round the seat, and facing Michael. "Let the girl alone; and don't make love to her."

"You're twice my size," said Michael, standing with his feet apart, and with his hands on his hips, and looking up at the other—"but I'm not afraid of you. Stella loves me, and I love her with all my heart; and I shall make love to her, as you call it, every day and all day and whenever I like."

The other man stood for a moment looking down at him; then turned abruptly, as though to regain

his self-control; took a few steps away, and came back again.

"I thought perhaps you didn't understand," said Jimmie, steadily, "and that when you knew how it was between Stella and me you'd have the grace to stand aside. I see you don't mean to do that."

"I do not," said Michael, promptly.

"Have you told anyone about this?"

"Don't I tell you that it only happened last night?" cried Michael, impatiently. "Of course I shall tell everybody. She is going to be my wife."

Jimmie looked at him in a dull fashion, with a little puzzled frown on his face; he was like some big animal that has been hurt or wounded, and does not understand why. "Look here," he said at last, "will you come back with me now, and see her—and the others—and tell them? Will you be a man, and come back with me, and let Stella say which is the truth?"

"Of course I will," said Michael. "I'm not afraid to do that."

So, with no further words between them, they marched side by side back to Little Place; and there Michael pulled the bell at No. 3, and stood waiting on the doorstep, with the silent Jimmie beside him, until the door was opened. Then, quite naturally, Michael walked in first, and with grave courtesy showed the other man into the little drawing-room—poor Jimmie already very much at a loss, although very determined.

"Will you be so very good, Priscilla, as to tell the ladies that we would like to see them," said Michael to the astonished maid.

They stood in utter silence until presently the door

was opened and the sisters came in, followed by Stella. Stella no sooner caught sight of the two men than she stopped, with a gasp, and a look in her eyes that suggested immediate flight.

"I am so very sorry to have disturbed you," said Michael, now a little white-faced, and with eyes that seemed to burn in their sockets—"but this is a matter that is rather important. It is a little matter—and yet a very big one. Stella!"

He held out his hand to her, and, after a momentary hesitation and a glance at Jimmie, Stella came forward and put her hand in that of the boy. The sisters, deeply attentive, watched the business as though assisting a little uncertainly at some ceremony.

"Last night," said Michael, in his clear voice—"the happiest night of my life and the greatest—I told Stella that I loved her. That was what made us so late in getting home; there is always such a lot to talk about when you are in love with anyone. I ought to have told you both"—still holding the girl's hand, he bowed to the sisters—"last night. But there were so many things to talk about. We love each other very dearly, and in a little time, when I am making my fortune, Stella is to be my wife. Isn't that so, Stella?"

The heavy, accusing figure of Jimmie seemed to fill the room; the girl did not raise her eyes. After a moment of silence, during which Jimmie seemed to challenge her, she came out with a whispered "Yes." And then, with an agonized face turned to Jimmie—"I do love him with all my heart and all my soul. I—I didn't understand before."

Jimmie fumbled with his hat for a moment as though seeking words; then walked slowly toward the door. As he passed through it the girl tugged at the hand that Michael was holding, exclaimed almost fiercely—"Oh, I can't let him go like that!"—and ran out after him.

She came upon him actually in the street. "Jimmie dear, it was all a mistake," she said. "I didn't understand; I didn't know what love was, Jimmie!"

"It doesn't matter," said Jimmie, gently, without looking at her. "It's all right."

Stella went a little forlornly back into the house; after a moment of hesitation into the drawing-room. There she found the three of them standing quite as though they had not moved since she went out of the room.

"This has taken us all a little by surprise," said Miss Dorcas. "You are both so young; are you quite sure of yourselves?"

"It's a big business to enter upon," said Miss Betsy of wide experience.

"I think we're very sure of ourselves," said Michael, with a laugh. "It came upon me last night that I needed her; that I loved her. She turned to me at once—didn't you, my darling?"

"Yes—at once," answered the girl.

Miss Dorcas exchanged a troubled glance with Miss Betsy. "Then we will say no more about it just now," said the elder sister. "But of course a great many plans will have to be made and talked about. One may not do these things in a hurry."

"There is no need for us to wait very long," exclaimed Michael. "I shall soon be making a very

great deal of money; you can ask Vasserot about that. We don't want to wait very long—do we, Stella?"

"If you don't mind, Michael, we want to talk to Stella," said Miss Dorcas. "Just for a few minutes, please."

The boy laughed and shrugged his shoulders, and went out of the room. Stella smiled at him as he went; but when the door was closed turned to the sisters with a little faint dread in her eyes.

"You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes, my dear," said Miss Dorcas. "Why did Jimmie Fielding come here?"

"I—I don't know," answered the girl. "I found him here when we all came down. I didn't understand it—not at first."

Miss Betsy took up the tale. "Then you understood it afterwards? Stella—why should Jimmie Fielding want to be here when Michael was telling us that he loved you?"

There was a long pause, while Stella stood looking down at her clasped fingers. "I've done nothing—nothing wrong," she said at last.

"We are quite sure of that, my dear," said Miss Dorcas, mildly. "At the same time, we who have known and loved you all these years have a right to some explanation."

"I've always—liked Jimmie very much," began the soft young voice at last, "and Jimmie has always—liked me. You see, there was no one else in all my world—no one at all. I had never seen anyone but Jimmie and the Major; and Jimmie and I had grown up together. When Jimmie told me that he—liked—

loved—me—I said that I loved him. Because”—she raised distressful eyes to them and spoke pleadingly—“oh, you dears, you don’t understand. I’d never had anyone in all my life say that to me—and it was nice to be loved. Don’t you understand?”

“A little, my dear,” said Miss Betsy.

Stella went on more eagerly. “And then, when Michael came—Michael, who made me laugh when he talked to me, and made me cry when he sang to me, and was half a dozen people in five minutes, and all of them delightful—I knew where the difference was. I hadn’t understood before what it was to love anybody so that you thought about them always, and about no one else; and last night, when he told me that he loved me, it was like a wonderful dream coming true; I could have knelt at his feet. I’ve never been so happy in all my life—never!”

“And Jimmie?” It was Miss Dorcas that put that question.

“Jimmie said—said it was all right—it didn’t matter,” whispered the girl.

“Poor Jimmie!” was the comment of Miss Betsy in a whisper.

And so the matter was left. There was, after all, nothing more to be said; but from that day the sisters were specially kind to a somewhat bewildered Jimmie—making a point of holding his hand longer than was necessary when they met him, and inquiring with deep anxiety after his health. Jimmie couldn’t understand it in the least, and used to retire after these interviews in deep and blushing confusion.

But now the return of Vasserot, coming like a whirlwind into the little house, thrust other matters

aside. Vasserot had again triumphed; the agent had been more than anxious. This time there was no question of a payment of money, as a species of bribe to hear the voice; money would be paid from the other side.

"And a thing remarkable, little master," exclaimed Vasserot, diving into his pockets in search for something. "You have already begun to conquer their hearts, little rogue; later it may happen that you shall break them. A fair lady"—he had got hold of a note by this time, and was waving it about between a thumb and forefinger—"a fair lady wonders that you have not been to see her—and one who met you only last night! It is of an absurdity!"

"Who is it?" asked Michael, stretching out a hand for the note.

"It is the adorable Celestine Wilde—she of the creditable voice who assisted you last night. Behold—I met her at the office of the agent person, and she pounced upon me with inquiries concerning you. Do not neglect her, little rogue; she may be of use to you."

He handed the note over. Michael ripped it open and read it. It was scrawled on the agent's note-paper, and merely asked that he would go and see her one afternoon, as he had promised.

"I think I should like to go and see her," said Michael. "She was very nice."

CHAPTER XI

CELESTINE

GUSTAVE VASSEROT, to whom the matter of Michael's engagement was mentioned a little nervously by the boy, received the information with his head cocked on one side and a mocking smile on his lips.

"It is well, my little one," he said. "It is necessary that you go to amuse yourself—to relax yourself, as it were. And the little baby—the little Stella is charming."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Gustave," exclaimed the boy, angrily. "I don't go to amuse myself, as you phrase it; I am deeply in love—"

"And will be deeply in love again—and yet again—and yet again still," mocked Vasserot, snapping a finger and thumb at him. "It is in the nature—in the very temperament of you."

"And I'm going to marry her," went on Michael.

"That also is well, if you think so," replied the other. "But be not in any hurry. She is a pretty baby, knowing nothing of the world—a shy little mouse, that will tire you to death a little later on. Rush not yourself into anything, little master. Why—the time shall surely come when, with that voice

and that face and that smile—you might marry a princess. Life is only but making a little beginning for you; presently it will spread out infinitely. Play with the little Stella, and kiss her, and make much of her; love her with all your heart. It is a good thing; it passes away the time. But no more than that—not a little bit more than that!"

Michael indignantly left him, and went in search of Stella. To her, when the boy retailed the conversation with Vasserot, the sheer wicked absurdity of such a love as theirs being merely something to pass the time was apparent at once. They were both sorry for Vasserot, that he could not understand what love really was, or what it meant.

"Poor old Vasserot married a woman once when he was very hard up," the boy confided to her. "She had saved a little money and Vasserot never saves anything. I've seen her"—he raised his hands and his eyes at the thought of poor Bathsheba—"and although she was good to me, I don't think I ever want to see her again. But please promise not to say anything about that; poor Vasserot isn't altogether proud of her, although he's good to her in his way."

For a day or two after that announcement which had sent Jimmie Fielding out of the house, Vasserot fretted and fumed and raged inwardly at what was going on. A second concert on a larger scale was being arranged for an early date, and it became imperative, as Vasserot declared, that the boy should continue practicing. But on one sunny morning he wanted to make the best of the fine weather, and to take Stella for a walk; and on another sunny morning he was not in the mood for singing; there was

plenty of time. And it was always Stella who, quite innocently, was thrust between Vasserot and work, or indeed in front of anything the boy did not want to do.

One morning in the little drawing-room, when Vasserot was seated at the piano, and the boy was singing, the big man let his fingers stray over the keys for a moment or two after the voice had died away, and then, without looking at Michael, asked a question.

"When it is that you present yourself, little one, to Miss Celestine?" He spoke lightly and half banteringly, for he was pleased, and the boy had sung well.

"I hadn't thought about it," said Michael, carelessly, as he bent to look at the music. "I say—I should like just to do that finish again."

Vasserot played again, and the boy sang; and once more Vasserot put another question.

"Perhaps it is that you do not like the lady?"

"What—Celestine Wilde? I like her very much—but there's plenty of time to see her. We're sure to meet. Besides, just now I've got other things to think of." He smiled and reddened.

Vasserot wheeled round on the piano-stool, and folded his arms, and shook a forefinger at the boy. "There are other things and other people—besides the little Stella—the baby with the blue eyes whom you so dearly love," he said rallyingly. "I am of a seriousness in this matter that would surprise you. I want to take you out into the world a little! I want you to see people who will be of use to you—people who will make you talk and make you laugh, and

show you what life is. I go to-day to see Miss Celestine; I ask that you will accompany me."

The boy turned and glanced out of the window. There had been no walk that morning, with Stella or with anyone else, because it was raining dismally. He had been working hard, and he was faced with the prospect of a long afternoon; even Vasserot would be away. And Vasserot was always capable of amusing him, and the boy craved amusement and interest always.

"Oh, yes, I'll come," said Michael. "After all, I suppose one might be civil; and she was very nice to me that night of the concert, when I was a bit shaken and upset. Certainly I'll come."

"You will not regret it," said Vasserot, nodding his head portentously. "I have a scheme in my head here"—he tapped his forehead with his long fingers. "I am, as you know, full always of schemes for you."

"I can't for the life of me see what scheme you can have that Miss Wilde can be concerned with," said Michael, with a laugh.

Vasserot nodded many times, and then gave a glance at the closed door, as though about to say something that should not be overheard even by the innocent creatures in that house. "I will give you a little secret—just perhaps the half of a little secret," he said impressively. "This Miss Celestine is a singer of a certain type that can always be relied on; she has studied much and has made a voice that is decent into a voice that is almost good. Also she knows the operas by heart; so that it happens sometimes that she is called upon, with but a moment for preparation, to sing; so much the agent

person told me. She can always get through, as he stated it, respectably. Consequently the opera people know her, and trust her."

"Well?" said the boy.

"The second half of the little secret is that she is but the first of many yet to come that has been a little touched by the pretty boy and the pretty voice. Do not blush, little rogue; these things must be. Also put together the fact that she is well known and trusted by the people of the opera—and the other fact that the singing boy has interested her just a little. I say no more."

"But it wouldn't be possible for her to do anything for me in that way," stammered Michael.

"I say no more," said Vasserot, with his eyes closed and his head shaking to and fro. "I declare only that it shall not always be concerts. Enough; we go to-day to see the good Miss Celestine Wilde."

Celestine Wilde lived in Knightsbridge; she had rooms at the very top of a tall house there, and the rooms were shut off, so as to make a species of flat. The maid-servant who admitted Vasserot and Michael was a tall, thin, angular woman, with a rather cold and distant manner; she said that Miss Wilde was at home and would see them. They were shown into a room littered with furniture (there is no other word to fit the confusion of it) and smothered all over with photographs large and small. Photographs of Celestine Wilde as this, that and the other; photographs of Celestine Wilde in ordinary walking costume and in indoor costume. Photographs also of famous singers signed by the famous singers themselves.

Apart from a huge cushioned lounge the chief article of furniture in the room was a grand piano.

The door opened, and Celestine came in. She was dressed in a long flowing robe that suited her to perfection; she looked very handsome. She walked into the room more quickly than usual, and her eyes were bright with excitement. She just touched Vasserot's hand in passing; but she had eyes only for the boy. She took his hand in both her own, and smiled at him with genuine pleasure.

"This is very good of you," she said. "I can't tell you how delighted I am. Was it much trouble to persuade him to come?" she asked, turning to Vasserot.

"No trouble in the least," Vasserot lied cheerfully. "He was of an eagerness that caused me to laugh."

"We'll have some tea directly," said Celestine. "Please don't notice my untidy room; I'm the most careless woman in the world. Come and sit here with me, Mr. Doran, and tell me what you have been doing. I know what you're going to do; I've already heard that."

Michael sat down on the huge lounge by her side and glanced at her. Somehow the kindly dark eyes made him feel shy and awkward; and he never remembered to have been shy or awkward with a woman before. But this woman, with her large movements, and her deep voice, and her tender, almost protecting way of talking to him, seemed to envelop him.

When presently tea was brought, Celestine opened a silver box with cigarettes in it, and offered it first

to Michael, who shook his head. "They won't let me smoke—at least, Vasserot won't," he said.

"Mr. Vasserot's quite right," she said, holding the box out toward that individual. And then, as he shook his head—"What—don't you smoke either?"

"I smoke but one kind, and I make him myself," said Vasserot, with a smile. He pulled out the little crumpled packet of black tobacco, and proceeded to roll a cigarette. "For me," he said calmly, as he lighted the thing, and puffed out the heavy penetrating smoke—"for me there is but one tobacco in the wide world—and it is here."

"I smoke also," said Celestine, taking a cigarette and lighting it. "I don't think anything could affect my throat."

Vasserot began to talk. Gently, while he smoked, he spoke about Celestine's voice; gently flattered her concerning it. She, who cared nothing for flattery of that sort, and knew exactly what her voice was, and what it was worth, listened with half-closed eyes and a queer smile about her lips. And then presently Vasserot got on to the one subject which really interested him at that time, to the exclusion of all others—the voice of Michael Doran. And from that, while Celestine watched the boy's flushed and excited face, it seemed but a step to talk of the opera, and of the singers to be heard there.

"When I think," said Vasserot, spreading out his hands, and talking jerkily, with his untidy cigarette waggling up and down between his heavy lips—"when I think of the so second-rate and but moderate voices that are singing there—to be heard by your fat, complacent, bald-headed and bediamonded people,

who know not one note from another—I am of a consternation that such things should be. And I—Gustave Vasserot—could take to them a voice that would send all other voices hurrying away like frightened hens. Is it not so?"

He directed the question straight at Celestine, and with lowered head, as she puffed out a little stream of smoke; she nodded quietly. "It is so. But then, my dear Vasserot, you've got to make people believe; also you have to remember that they are always prepared for little illnesses, to say nothing of little tempers; there are plenty of people ready to step in at a moment's notice."

"And why should not the little master step in at a moment's notice?" demanded Vasserot, instantly. "I, alas! do not know these people of the opera; I cannot approach them. You, who know what the voice is like—you understand—"

"Oh, yes—I understand," she broke in impatiently, getting up from the lounge, and moving across the room. She stood for a moment or two leaning against the mantelpiece; presently she turned, and smiled with a sort of mocking mischief at Vasserot. "I want to talk to Mr. Doran," she said. "We singers have something in common, and I have quite a lot to say to him. He interests me very much, and I want to keep him here for a little while."

Vasserot was instantly on his feet. "It was on the very tip of my tongue to say to you that I must hurry away; I have an appointment that must not be broken," he said.

But Michael sprang to his feet also. "But I'm afraid that I must hurry off," he stammered. "I can

go with you, Gustave, and wait while you keep your appointment."

"And for why?" demanded Vasserot, spreading out his hands, and gazing with a sort of bland anger at Michael. "A lady says that she wishes to talk with the little Michael; surely the little Michael is honored!"

"I beg your pardon," said the boy, turning to Celestine quickly and bowing. "I was only afraid that I might outstay my welcome. But of course I shall be delighted—"

"And so shall I," she answered him easily, with a smile.

Therefore Vasserot kissed her hand, and took his leave, not without the wagging of a forefinger roguishly at the little Michael. And Michael settled himself down by the side of Celestine, and clasped his hands round his knee, and talked to her in his own charming, ingenuous fashion.

"Dear old Vasserot believes in me a great deal more than I believe in myself. He thinks that I can do anything, and go anywhere, with my voice. Whereas you know what a lot of hard work it means, especially here in England; I begin to be afraid sometimes, Miss Wilde."

She smiled indulgently at him. "There's nothing to be afraid of," she answered—"not with your voice. I've been thinking a lot about you since we met."

"That's very nice of you," he said.

"You're so different from—all the others," she said, with a little sigh. "There's something refreshing about you—something that takes one back to the time when one began. That time, I mean, when hopes

were high, and the world was a thing to be conquered, and all men and women were clean and sweet and honest—playing the great game of life like children, with never a thought of harm.” She stretched out a hand, and laid it on his arm. “You’ve done me good.”

“But you’ve made a big position for yourself, Miss Wilde,” said he.

She shook her head slowly while she looked at him out of narrowed eyes. “It’s very good of you to say that—but you know too much of the game to believe it to be true. I’m just one of the hack workers, and they know they can always depend on me. You’re different. Now, tell me”—she leaned forward, with her elbow on her knees, and looked earnestly at him—“what do you know about opera generally?”

“I think it ought rather to be what *don’t* I know,” he said, with a smile.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Look here, Miss Wilde; I’m stuffed full with opera to the throat,” he said, speaking eagerly. “For years and years—at least for three years—Gustave Vasserot has been drilling me. I had all the languages before; I’ve been in every country in Europe—up and down—up and down—with my father since I was a baby. Therefore, you see, the rest was easy. I’ve got them all at my tongue’s end—all the tenor parts. I could go on for anything, and sing it.”

“Why—this is fine!” she exclaimed. “I never thought of this. My dear boy, I’ll have you on before long, I can assure you. That was the one thing needful; to have a repertoire at your tongue’s end—and to have that voice. Oh, my dear”—she sighed, and nodded at him—“just to begin again—with your

chances and your looks. You don't think me coarse in saying that—do you?"

"I should never think anything that you said was anything but good and gentle and kind," he said.

She got up hurriedly, and suddenly turned on the electric light. "Oh! don't be too sure," she said, with a sudden harsh note in her voice. "I might have an axe to grind; how do you know I haven't?"

"I'm quite sure you're only doing it just to help me," Michael responded earnestly.

She softened in a moment. "It's nice of you to believe that," she said, swaying a little toward him—"because it's true."

At that moment the maid opened the door, and, standing very erect and prim at the side of it, announced—"Mr. Nicholson Rawle."

The man who entered was tall and thin, with carefully-parted scanty dark hair, and a deeply-lined, clean-shaven face. His eyes never opened fully; he looked at everything through half-closed lids. He gave one the impression that nothing about him ever moved, except just his legs in walking, and the hands sometimes. He came in stiffly, sweeping a glance over Michael for a moment, and then letting his gaze rest on the woman. If he had said in so many words—"What are you doing now, I wonder? Will you kindly explain?"—his meaning could not have been more apparent.

"How do you do?" was what he actually did say as he took her hand.

Celestine was evidently a little annoyed at his coming; she received him coldly, and then made the neces-

sary introductions. Nicholson Rawle bent his head slightly in the boy's direction, and then sat down.

"I called yesterday," he remarked presently, as he pulled off his gloves.

"So I was told," said Celestine. "I was out."

He said nothing for a moment or two, while he gently blew into his gloves, and then straightened them out on his knee. "A little unfair, my dear," he said at last, without looking up, "when you had told me you would be at home."

"I changed my mind," she retorted, flinging the sentence at him over her shoulder from where she stood by the fireplace. "Will you have some tea?"

"I thank you—no," answered Rawle. "I came yesterday—and I'm here again to-day—because I want to talk to you."

Michael got to his feet. "It's awfully nice of you, Miss Wilde—" he began.

But with a hand on his shoulder she detained him. "I won't have you going yet; I've lots of things to talk to you about," she said, in a tone that was infinitely tender and caressing. She turned to the other man. "Mr. Doran and I have been talking about music; Mr. Doran is a very great singer."

Rawle put a hand over his mouth to conceal a yawn. "Tremendously interesting, I should think," he said.

"We were talking about music when you came in," said Celestine again. "And I have a great deal more to say to Mr. Doran."

"I wouldn't interrupt you for the world," said Rawle, passing one hand over his smooth hair. "My time is my own, you know; I can wait."

Michael turned to her again quickly. "Really, I

think I must go. I should like to come and see you some other day."

"But I don't want you to go," she breathed, in a petulant whisper. Then, seeing that there was no way out of it, she walked to the door of the room, while Michael followed her.

Michael bowed to Rawle as he passed; the latter surveyed him through those half-closed eyes, and made no response. Celestine closed the door upon the boy and herself.

"My afternoon has been spoilt," she said pathetically, smiling at him. "And perhaps you'll make up your mind that you don't want to see me again."

She was so handsome, and her eyes were so fine and tender, that Michael flushed as he said eagerly—"But I want to see you—very, very often."

She gave him her hand, and as he took it in his he raised it to his lips. "Prove that by coming to me very soon," she said, in a whisper; and then opened the outer door for him. As he looked back at her, before the door was closed, he saw that she was still smiling at him in that tender, wistful fashion; he carried that picture of her, framed in the doorway, for quite a long time.

And Celestine went back into the room. Rawle did not appear to have moved, and she swept past him with a little gathering-up of her draperies. She flung herself petulantly on the big lounge, and took up another cigarette without speaking, and lighted it.

"Your handsome young friend doesn't appear to have improved your temper, my dear," said the man.

She smoked in silence for a moment or two; then impatiently flung the cigarette into the fire, and

stretched her arms behind her head. "My handsome young friend, as you call him, has had nothing whatever to do with my temper," she said sharply. "You can visit that upon yourself. If you want the truth, I didn't want to see you to-day."

"Nor yesterday?" he suggested calmly.

"Nor yesterday," she retorted. "I suppose I'm entitled to have my moods, just as others have them—eh?"

"Whether you're entitled to have them or not, one generally sees a great deal of them," he replied. He rose slowly from his chair, and dragged it after him across the room; finally settled himself beside the big lounge, and leaned forward, and looked at her. "Well—who's the new wonder?"

"If you mean Doran—he's a boy with a tenor voice. Now, for God's sake, talk about something else."

"Thank you—I prefer to talk about the boy with the tenor voice," he said. "He's not like the usual sort; and he's certainly not like the majority of your visitors. Have you known him long?"

"A matter of a few days," she answered indifferently.

"It's long enough," he said. "Well—he's rather young for Celestine to fall in love with."

She turned over slowly on the big lounge, until she could face him; her eyes were dangerous, and her mouth a straight line. "Will you be good enough to explain exactly what it is you're talking 'about?'" she said slowly.

"I think you know," he answered. "I can see as far into a woman's soul—if she happens to possess one, of which I am sometimes in doubt—as most men.

You had looks for that boy, and words for him, that I shouldn't have believed you could have for anybody; certainly I haven't seen them before. It was quite pretty to watch you."

There was a long pause. "Anything else?" she asked at last, rolling over, and so turning her face from him.

"Only this, my dear—that it won't do," he said; and now it seemed that she listened intently. "You know it won't do. There's only one man in all the world for you—and you know who that is. And that one man, I think, understands you, chiefly because he has no illusions about you."

"So you told me once before," she said, without looking at him.

"You have a good memory. Yes—I told you once before, on the occasion that I asked you to do me the honor of marrying me."

"Honor?" The word flashed out fiercely from between her teeth.

"Honor! It was an honor, because, you see, my dear, I knew all about you—or most of it, at any rate. I won't recapitulate; but I could tell that boy certain things—and do you think he'd come to see you again? Do you think that he'd be walking away now, dreaming about you, and thinking how wonderful you are, and how sweet it is of you to interest yourself in him, and to smile upon him—"

With a swirl of her draperies she flung herself suddenly upright, with her hands upon her ears. "Stop!" she shouted; and began to pace up and down the room.

Rawle got slowly up from his chair, and carried it back to the exact position it had occupied before. "My dear Celestine," he said, "I wouldn't hurt you for the world. It was only a word of warning. I think you know I'm the sort of man that, demanding a thing, gets it eventually. I want you—and I shall get you, by the prosaic and highly-respectable method of marrying you. I won't talk about money matters, because you know all about them already; you shall have what settlements you like. And, as I have said, I don't care a fig for what people would call your past—your little indiscretions—I simply want you—as you are."

"You won't get me," she cried savagely.

"Oh, yes, I shall," he replied, smiling for the first time. "And I'm content to wait. But you're too old, Celestine, to be falling in love with boys. I grant that you're just the age that will prove most attractive to him; and perhaps, with the memory of a youth that is gone, he may be just the age that is most attractive to you. But you'd better drop it; because I shall interfere."

She swung round upon him, and stood there, with her bosom heaving and her lips parted; Rawle looked at her steadily, thinking how magnificent she was. Then at last she turned away, and spoke quickly to him in a suppressed voice.

"I think you'd better go—now—at once," she said. "I can't trust myself; and I've got to sing to-night. Will you go?"

He picked up his hat and gloves, looked at her for a moment; and then, without a word, walked out of

the room. She heard the outer door close behind him.

She stood for a moment, swaying a little, with a hand to her head. Then she moved slowly across to the lounge, and flung herself upon it in a wild abandonment of tears.

CHAPTER XII

A SPREADING OF WINGS

GUSTAVE VASSEROT lay in his new bed in that upper room that had once been Stella's nursery, and that had the little gate protecting it from the flight of stairs outside. He was smoking a cigarette which he had rolled from the little packet of tobacco which lay on a table at the bedside; and he was reading a letter which had been thrust by Priscilla under his door. Priscilla had a constitutional dread of him, and nothing would induce her to enter his room until after he had quitted it.

Vasserot read the letter frowningly, and with many impatient movements of his huge frame in the bed. It was a scrawled and illiterate thing, and it was from Bathsheba.

Bathsheba was growing strangely restless. It seemed that she had got a situation, and, from her account of it, a good and comfortable situation; but she wanted to come back to Vasserot. She had quarrelled with her mistress, and had given notice; had been implored (so she suggested) to stay on a little longer. Finally she hinted that she had carefully saved her wages.

"Bah! it is the mind of a mouse!" exclaimed Vasserot, petulantly flicking the letter with a finger-nail.

"Her little wages, indeed! She may keep them; I no longer require that she should help me. Yet what to do with the imbecile—that is the question. It is annoying, and it upsets me; I do not like to be upset, especially in the morning."

He thought about it while he dressed and shaved. He had no affection for the woman, and never had had; he simply had a sort of pitying tolerance. But her letter worried him, and he thought about it more than was perhaps necessary.

Matters had been going rather well for Vasserot. That second concert had been arranged, and was likely to prove a huge success; others were in prospect. And he had heard rumors—mere whispered suggestions—from Celestine regarding the possibility of the boy's appearance—sudden and unexpected—in opera. So that, save for this irritating matter of Bathsheba, "all was of a smoothness," as Vasserot phrased it.

Michael came down to breakfast that morning very late and somewhat irritable. Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy hovered about him—one pouring out his tea, and the other pressing food upon him; but he ate and drank little. They were getting to know that mood pretty well by this time, and to dread it. It was a rare mood—just a gust of sulky passion, that shook the boy, and then left him penitent and saddened, and with a double charm of manner to atone for what he had done. This morning the mood lasted longer than usual; he sat crumbling his toast, and occasionally sipping his tea, and saying nothing.

"You haven't slept well, dear Michael," suggested Miss Betsy.

"Oh, yes—I slept pretty well," he answered. "Where's Stella?"

"Stella finished her breakfast ever so long ago; I don't know what she's doing at the moment," said Miss Dorcas, eagerly. "I'll find her."

"No, I don't want her found," he exclaimed petulantly. "Only it seems strange that she should always rush away the moment that breakfast is done. I can't help being a little late sometimes. Why on earth can't she wait for five minutes?"

Miss Betsy, without a word, went out of the room; in a moment Miss Dorcas, who had been fidgeting things about on the table, went quickly out after her. Vasserot had been standing by the window, with his arms folded, watching the boy; he gave a short laugh, and spoke.

"It is that the little aunts, fluttering about and making a great fuss, irritate you, little one?" said Vasserot. "Like all the women; never can they understand when to be silent, and when to obliterate themselves. Nor will they ever learn that. What is wrong with you, Michael? Tell the good Gustave."

"There is nothing wrong; who said there was?" said the boy. "Haven't you seen enough of me by this time to realize what sort of fellow I am? And don't stand there staring at me, and nodding that confounded head of yours backwards and forwards."

"It is that the little master irritates himself without reason," said Vasserot, complacently. "Or perhaps there is a reason?"

"There is no reason at all," answered Michael, coldly.

Yet there was a reason, and a strong one. For a

week Michael had not seen anything of Celestine Wilde. On that occasion when Nicholson Rawle had visited her Michael had made up his mind that he would not go there again. After all, Vasserot would be meeting her, and Vasserot would talk to her upon business matters; Michael told himself that he would not go. He thought a great deal about Nicholson Rawle, and about the air of proprietorship the man had adopted as regarded Celestine; and in an indefinite fashion Michael was annoyed and hurt by it.

Then, some three days later, Michael had set off to find her. At the time of actually starting he told himself that he might perhaps call upon her—if he had time; there was no actual necessity for his going at all. But his feet took him straight to that top flat in Knightsbridge, and there he rang the bell. The frigid-looking maid opened the door, and looked at him.

"Is Miss Wilde at home?" asked Michael, with a flush upon his face.

"Miss Wilde is not at home, sir," answered the maid.

The boy was half-way downstairs before he realized that that had been a mere conventional reply; she had refused to see him! The face of the maid came before his mental vision, and he knew instinctively that the reply had been a conventional one and not an actual truth. He went hot and cold when he understood that she had given instructions that she would not see him.

After that, of course, he comforted himself with the belief that she was perhaps resting, and had denied herself to everyone. Yes—that was it; she

had not singled him out only. The idea of that was absurd. He would call again.

He called again, with the same result. The maid looked at him stonily, and barred the way; Michael stood helplessly looking at her.

"Is Miss Wilde really out—or is it that she won't see people?" he dared to ask.

"Miss Wilde is not at home, sir," answered the woman.

He was turning away reluctantly, when he determined to put another question. "Could you tell me when she will be at home?" he asked, striving to melt her with his smile.

"I could not possibly say, sir," she answered; and closed the door.

All this business only made Michael think more and more about the strange woman who had smiled at him, and been kind to him, and talked to him as no other woman had ever done. He found himself getting up in the morning, and wondering if by chance there would be a note from her; he watched Vasserot closely, hoping against hope that Vasserot would have met her, and would bring some message from her. He was not so much deeply interested in her as he was puzzled and angry about her.

He was in that mood this morning, when he sat crumbling his toast, and listening to what Vasserot was saying.

And then the door opened quickly and Stella came in. She glanced shyly at Vasserot, and then, advancing to Michael, put an arm round his neck and kissed him. "Good-morning, dear," said she.

He looked round at her, and his face cleared.
"Good-morning, my darling," he said.

Vasserot marched out of the room with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Don't you know, my dearest Stella," went on the boy, "that I need you in the morning; I want to see your dear bright face directly I come into the room."

"I'm so sorry, Michael."

"You see, my darling, the aunts are delightful—and I'm very fond of them; but the aunts are not Stella. And they keep doing things for me, and looking at me in a frightened way, and then whispering together; anyone would think I was a frightful brute, and that they were really afraid of me. Where-as, of course, I'm nothing of the sort—am I?"

"Why—of course not," she answered quickly. "I suppose it is because they're so anxious that everything should be just right for you. You know what dears they are."

"I know—I know," he responded, with a touch of impatience—"they're wonderful. But, oh, my dear—" he got hold of her hand, and began to separate the fingers, and to caress each one, as he always did—"sweet little canary—let it be your face that I see in the morning always—won't you? It starts the day well for me, and means a great deal to me. If I get your face first of all in the morning, I shan't go about wounding and hurting people, as I sometimes do. I've even upset old Vasserot this morning."

"I will always be here in future," she assured him.

"That'll be splendid!" he exclaimed, with a smile. "I was certain that it was just because you didn't remember. And I must be good to the aunts; I'm

afraid I almost spoke sharply to them this morning. I am a bit of a brute—and I never mean to be."

She dropped her arm again about his neck. "Dearest Michael—you are never a brute; that's absurd," she whispered. "Above all, you could never be a brute to me."

"God forbid!" he murmured, taking the hand that rested on his shoulder, and putting it to his lips.

"I have given you my life—my love—everything," she whispered. "I am the proudest and the happiest girl in all the world. I did not think that such happiness could ever come to me; I had done nothing to deserve it."

"You thought you were just going to grow up—here with the aunts, and perhaps some day marry—"

She put a hand swiftly over his lips. "I lived on dreams—and now the dreams have come true," she whispered.

It was a morning of sunshine, and they went out together for a long tramp across the Heath. They came back, hungry and breathless, just before lunch; there was a letter lying on the little hall table addressed to Michael. Stella went upstairs to take off her hat; at the turn of the stairs she looked back at him, and saw him reading it, absorbed.

Yet it was only a matter of a line or two:

"DEAR SINGING BOY: Come and see me. I'll explain. I've been mad; come and make me sane again.
again. "CELESTINE."

That was all; but he read it again and again. After thrusting it into his pocket he went up to his

room, and pulled it out, and read it again. It was a mere scrawl, and already he pictured her sitting at a desk he had noticed in the room, and dashing it off, and sending the maid out to post it. There had been a reason for denying herself to him; even with the very thought that he did not know what the reason was, he told himself that he did know, and thrust the letter out of sight again.

He went that afternoon to Knightsbridge. At first he had a boyish feeling that he would go in casually, very late—as though it did not matter in the least whether he went or whether he stayed away. But it ended in his going quite early, and climbing the stairs, and ringing the bell. He frowned with impatience that his heart should beat as it was doing then.

The frigid maid opened the door, and this time stepped back with lowered eyes, and allowed him to pass in. As he went into the room Celestine came quickly toward him, and caught his hand, and drew him toward her; then turned away, with a little shy laugh, and motioned him to the lounge. She sat down, and looked at him for a moment or two in silence, and yet with lips moving, as though she would have spoken, but held back the words.

“Well—am I quite mad?” she asked at last, in a whisper.

His hands had found hers again somehow; even in the very act of thinking of something else he thought how fine and strong they were, and how beautifully kept. They were very different from a little hand that had rested on his shoulder that morning, and the fingers of which he had toyed with while he talked.

"No—you're not mad," he said; and the steadiness and strength of his voice startled him. "Everything you do is just right. Why didn't you let me see you?"

She turned away to open the silver box that held her cigarettes; her hand was shaking. She opened the lid of the box, and let it fall again; then turned, and looked at him steadily. "Why? Because I was afraid."

"There was nothing to be afraid of," he said, with boyish arrogance.

"Yes—there was a great deal to be afraid of," she answered. "At first I thought that I wouldn't see you again—unless we just met by accident; and after that I made up my mind that if we did meet I wouldn't talk to you as I'm talking to you now, but would simply let everything alone. And then I knew that in justice to myself, and even to you, I'd got to talk to you."

She got up, and moved across the room; the brushing of her dress on the carpet was the only sound. The boy's eyes followed her as she moved; when presently she looked round at him her face looked drawn with pain and weariness.

"You're too young yet to know what it means to have missed everything, or to have found out what you wanted when it was too late. I've been missing things all my life; and the things I have got have only been half-things, after all. Do you know what I mean? I've got half a voice—and I'm half good—and half bad."

"You're not bad," said Michael, quietly. "That's impossible."

She crossed the room, and suddenly dropped on her

knees beside the lounge on which he sat, and curved an arm upon it, and dropped her head on the arm; and so looked up at him. "You needn't be afraid of me," she said, with her slow smile. "And this afternoon we shall not be disturbed. This is an afternoon that's cut out of my life—something set apart, to be looked back upon—or perhaps to be forgotten. Little Michael—why didn't I meet you ever so many years ago?"

He sat still, looking at her and saying nothing. After a moment or two she went on again:

"I did meet you—æons and æons ago—in some other life. Don't you remember, Michael? You were a great singer then, only with a voice finer than you have now. That sounds impossible; but it is so. And you sang then in a place so vast that it would hold—oh, twenty times as many as any place you have ever seen. You had the deep blue sky for a vaulted roof; and when you sang there was no whisper—no murmur of sound—in all the dense ranks of those who stood to hear you. And I was one of those that stood to hear you—worshipping and wondering—and yet glad to think that you sang better because you had the thought of me in your heart. It is all buried under the sands of a desert—deep down; and our bodies lie there—sleeping the everlasting sleep. Do you remember?

"Anyone but you, Michael, would laugh at me; somehow I knew you wouldn't. That's why I asked you to come and see me to-day—because this is the last time that we shall speak like this; for ever after we meet and smile, and touch hands and pass by."

"I want to be friends with you," he said impulsively, bending down toward her.

She looked up at him for a moment, and then lowered her eyes. "You are the fairest, cleanest, brightest thing that has come into my life," she said slowly at last—"and I thank my God for you. I am not the fairest nor cleanest thing that has ever come into your life; and I'll say no more of that. That man you saw here the other day is the fit one to stand beside me, and to walk with me; and that is what is going to happen one of these days."

"You won't do that—you mustn't," said Michael, quickly.

"I will—and I must," she answered slowly. "He's got all I need—money, and all that sort of thing. And after that I shall always look back on this afternoon—set apart from everything else, and never to be repeated—the afternoon when I lived for a little time, and was sorry for things—and glad for others. I wonder if you'll remember—or if some day you'll laugh when you think of the woman who stripped her soul bare to you."

"I shan't laugh," he said; and his hand dropped to hers where it lay close to his. "I said I wanted to be friends with you; and so I'm not going to let you throw me aside, or—or meet me just on a commonplace footing. I couldn't do that; you're something so different from everyone else I've ever known."

"Yes—we're both something so different to each other from everything we have ever known," she answered slowly. And then, after a pause—"Who was the pretty girl you insisted should take you home the other night—the night of the concert?"

He reddened under her glance. "She—she's a sort of cousin—adopted by my aunts."

"I thought she was adorable," said Celestine, slowly. "And so did you—if I mistake not. Come—didn't you think so?"

"Yes—of course I thought so. We—we're tremendous friends."

"On this one afternoon in my life, Michael, you are to tell me everything," she said. "Everything, for instance, about the little golden-haired girl—Stella—wasn't it?"

"Yes." And then, after a pause—"She loves me—I mean, we love each other very dearly—and some day I'm going to marry her."

"I thought so," said Celestine. "She's as much your sweet and fitting mate as—well, as the man you saw here the other day is mine."

"I won't let you say that," said Michael, fiercely. "You're too good for that; all you've said about yourself isn't true. I know it isn't true."

"Let be—let be," she said, as she got to her feet and moved away across the room. "And now—I'm glad to have had this talk to you—sweet singer that knew me ages and ages ago. It's good at least to think," she added whimsically, "that in our last long sleep under the desert sand we are together, and may rest there till Time shall be no more. Is that foolish? No—I see that you don't think so."

When he went away, and they stood together for a moment looking at each other, she suddenly took his face between her hands and kissed him. Her own face was very white as she did so, and as she

turned away quickly, he heard her say—"The end of my afternoon!"

Michael was young enough to go away with a strang feeling of elation. He had read between the lines of what she had said to him; and as he went back toward Little Place he pictured her always in that attitude in which he only had seen her: on her knees beside the lounge, with her arm curved upon it, and her face half hidden, with shy, tender glances up toward him. He was never to see her like that again; but the picture remained stamped indelibly on his memory. It was like a picture in a secret room, into which he could go, leaving all else outside; and which he could lock away again when he had looked his fill of it.

He was so absorbed in the contemplation of that picture that he only noticed, with a sort of vague wonder, that the demure and elderly maid Priscilla, who opened the door to him, wore an antique bonnet and jacket, and was in tears. She sniffed audibly as she let him in, and in the midst of his abstraction he began to scent disaster. He was more sure of that disaster, and yet felt it as quite an impersonal matter, beside the great events of the afternoon, when he found Vasserot marching up and down the little drawing-room, and Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy and Stella almost crouched together on chairs in a corner, looking at him.

"I have always at the back of my head the thought of the little master; it is a never-ending thought," Vasserot was crying. He paused on the entrance of Michael to drop an arm about his shoulders, and so drag the boy into the business. "The little Michael

shall speak, if I have not already spoken sufficiently. For myself, I desire nothing; did I not say that I would sleep on the bare boards; have I not suggested that a crust is all-sufficient for me? But when the little master is concerned—then hesitation flies from me, and I act. *As I have acted*—this with a dramatic gesture of his disengaged hand, and a shaking of his huge body—“this afternoon.”

“What is it all about?” asked Michael, a little bewildered. He had come in from a land of dreams, to find himself in a business which concerned himself apparently, and yet which he did not understand.

Instantly Vasserot turned upon him, and, with workings of his face, and many gestures, and much clapping of great hands upon Michael’s shoulders, explained.

“Little master—I have watched with trembling and with dismay and with secret weepings of the very heart’s blood of me—I have watched that you do not eat. At first, I have told myself that it is but a natural condition of youth and love, and that it will pass away; with that thought I have contented myself. Yet have I noticed—and mark you this well!—that the little love-story is a happy one”—he leered at Stella, and shook his head roguishly at her—and moves with a great smoothness. Then am I puzzled; then do I ask myself what other reason there can be for the setting aside of breakfasts, and of *déjeuners*, and of everything else. And at last I light upon it—it is a revelation!”

His voice had ended in a shout; he looked round in triumph, as though calling upon them to witness

this great discovery. And then his voice dropped to the gentlest possible tone.

"Never shall it be said that it is the fault of the excellent Priscilla (a name adorable)—that she does not prepare viands to suit the palate of the little master, who is perhaps over-fastidious. But the excellent Priscilla is old, and the ambition of her youth to do well has probably forsaken her. Therefore I make a great determination; and I say to myself that I will not trouble the excellent aunts, who have already, God knows, troubled themselves overmuch for us; no—I will act on my own account, and in the service of the little master. It is fortunate that I know one who is a cook of the most extraordinary; it is also fortunate that that cook is, in a fashion, at my command. I do not dwell upon it," he added airily—"but once it was in my power to do that cook a little service—a mere trifle—not to be thought about nor talked about. Therefore I demand instantly the presence of that cook—and she comes at my bidding."

"Is it Bathsheba?" asked Michael, in a low voice.

Vasserot gave him a nod, even while he continued his speech. "Is it the fault of one who works solely for the little master that the excellent Priscilla, of the name adorable, takes it to herself that a slight is intended, and leaves the house? Is it conceivable that she will not live in amity, and in the same bed-chamber, with this cook who is of an excellence and a respectability unsurpassed? What is one to do?"

"Priscilla has been with us for many years," said Miss Dorcas. "She tells me that she has contrived to save a little money; and that we shall of course

supplement; nevertheless, it is hard for us to lose her."

"It is desolating to me!" exclaimed Vasserot, tragically. "Yet what is one to do?"

After all, what was one to do? Priscilla had declared her intention of going out of the house that very day; there were some vague relations with whom she could stay. Vasserot looked on, with much shaking of the head, at a somewhat tearful farewell between the little ladies and Stella on the one hand, and Priscilla on the other; and then Priscilla went away, in tearful dignity, in a cab which she had fetched herself, and with her box on the roof of it. And Bathsheba, transformed as to appearance to some extent, brought up a dinner the like of which had never been seen in Little Place before. So inconsistent is human nature, that Miss Betsy whispered guiltily to Miss Dorcas that night, as they stood together for a moment in Miss Betsy's room, that it might be possible one of these days to give a little dinner-party—to the Fieldings and to the Major—if only for the sake of dear Michael!

The date of the second concert drew near—and nearer yet. It was to be a very important affair; but for those chiefly concerned it had not about it the extraordinary excitement that had attended the first. The sisters, of course, were elated; but then there was a certainty about this concert, comparatively speaking, that had not attended the first. Nor did they go in quite the order in which they had gone before; for the Major declined the offer of a ticket, on the ground that "Concerts were not much in his line;" while Jimmie was busy that night, and Mrs.

Fielding did not care to go. So that the sisters and Stella went down in a cab together, and Vasserot vanished, as before, with Michael.

This time the place was very full, and there was an air of expectancy about everyone that had been lacking before. It all went off wonderfully, with a storm of applause and many recalls; and, as before, the excited little ladies and Stella found their way to the artists' room to see Michael. Not a broken-down, trembling Michael this time, but a Michael pleased and proud, and sure of himself, and glad to shake hands with all sorts of people who were only too pleased to shake hands with him.

And then the door opened and Celestine Wilde came in. She walked up to the boy, with an easy, familiar air of friendliness; they murmured together for a moment or two, while the others stood apart.

"I've been in front this time," she said. "I wanted to get in touch with the audience; I wanted to know exactly how you affected them. And besides, I wanted to get all the excitement of you from a new point of view."

"I wish I had known that you were there," he said. "I should have sung better."

She shook her head. "That would have been impossible," she answered him seriously. And then, after a pause, she stretched out her hand suddenly. "Good-night!" she said quickly. "By the way—I almost came to see you the other day."

"Why didn't you?" he asked quickly.

"Oh—I thought better of it," she said whimsically. "So I made the excuse to myself that Hampstead was a long way away. Don't you find it a long way?"

"It is—rather," he said. "But then, you see, they've all been very kind to me."

"Is that so wonderful? Good-night again."

He caught at her hand as she held it out to him. "I say—let me see you home."

She laughed. "The little blue-eyed girl has been watching me ever since I came into the room," she said. "You've got to take her home; it's her right, you know."

"She's going back with her aunts—just as she came," he pleaded.

"Give me my hand; everybody is looking at us," she said, in a low tone. And then, as he released her hand, she gathered her cloak about her, and said quietly—"I go alone—as I came. Don't spoil things, Michael."

So it happened that on this occasion Michael did not suggest that it was vitally necessary to him that Stella should return to Little Place with only himself for company. Instead, something to the horror of Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy, he insisted that the four of them should return together in a taxi-cab; he over-rode all their protests. And he was very silent all the way home.

But the vehicle was necessarily dark inside, and when they had left the lighted streets behind them, and were on their way toward Hampstead, Stella ventured to steal a hand out in search of his. And when he found the hand, and felt its light pressure on his fingers, he woke suddenly from a gloomy reverie, and turned quickly to her with a sudden lightening of his face. After all, he loved her very dearly; and, although he could not see them, he

remembered the innocent blue eyes that had smiled at him, and remembered, too, just the tenderness of her look. It was suddenly very good to have had a big success that night, and to be going home with little Stella, back to the little house that was his home and hers. He thought what a fool he had been not to have demanded the lover's privilege of taking her home, and leaving the sisters to come back in their own way.

He slept till late the next morning; Vasserot had given instructions that under no circumstances whatever was the little master to be disturbed, on pain of Vasserot's deep displeasure. Vasserot, for his part, went out to get the newspapers, and returned with a sheaf of them; he took all the cuttings up to Michael's room, and, finding him just beginning to wake, sat down on the side of his bed and read extracts to him—with much exclaiming, and many gestures, as of old.

"Gustave," said the boy, suddenly breaking in on a reading—"this place is a very long way from London."

"What?" Vasserot did not like to be interrupted, and he had not taken in the full significance of the remark. "Oh—from London it is certainly a long way; but one has the advantage of good air for the lungs and good food—for nothing." He chuckled at his own jest, and nodded over it. "Now, listen to this; a critic person with a brain, and with some idea of his poor trade. Listen, my little one—"

"Oh, put the thing away; I don't want to hear it," said Michael, petulantly. "They're all alike; they even use the same phrases. I'm going to get up; but before I get up I want to speak to you a minute."

Vasserot folded up the slips, with a somewhat offended air, and thrust them into his pocket.

"Speak," he said, with dignity; "it is the place of the poor Gustave to listen."

Michael sat up in bed. "I thought of it last night, when—when we were coming home. Now that I'm getting on a bit, and now that I want really and seriously to make headway, I seem to be out of the world here."

Vasserot turned his head quickly, and gave him a long look; then nodded without speaking.

"I'm sure you understand, old Gustave," went on Michael. "Suppose anyone wants to see me; it'd take them an awful time to find this place—wouldn't it?" Vasserot nodded again. "And then—they mightn't like to come down here—eh?"

Vasserot grinned slowly, and wagged a long forefinger before his nose. "It is as I have thought—often and often," he said. "The little singing-bird beats against the bars of his cage, and would be spreading his wings! Is it not so?"

"It isn't that I'm ungrateful," said Michael, with a sudden lowering of his voice, and a glance toward the door of the room. "They've been awfully good to me; besides, it wouldn't be like actually leaving them. Only I thought—and I was thinking about it a lot last night—couldn't we have some place in town where I could live? If it was only a couple of rooms—with a good piano. I should come back here, of course, pretty well every day—and week-ends, and that sort of thing. But I should be on the spot, where I could go about more easily, and see people—shouldn't I?"

His voice had fallen to an eager whisper. Vasserot made no immediate reply; instead, he walked across to the door, and took down a dressing-gown that hung there; coming back, he laid it carefully round the boy's shoulders.

"It is of a great necessity that you should not, at least, take cold," said Vasserot. "For the rest—it is but a little matter," he added, with a shrugging of the shoulders—"it is at least a matter easy of arrangement."

"And you think I'm right?"

"At the present moment, my little master, I think that all things you do, and most things you say, are very right," said Vasserot, calmly. "And I had myself thought of this matter; it was almost a determination in my mind to advance it to you. It is a good idea; it is a very good idea. I see it all myself, with my two eyes, to a perfection. A large room in which to work, and in which to receive one's friends; a little room in which to sleep. For myself"—he shrugged his shoulders, and arched his eyebrows, and spoke with a fine carelessness—"a little chamber anywhere under the tiles; the poor Gustave may be put anywhere. It is a matter of very great simplicity."

"I'm glad you think so, old Gustave," said the boy, scrambling out of bed and pulling the dressing-gown round him. "I'll talk to the aunts to-day; it won't cost very much, and I shall be earning a lot of money quite soon now. In fact, that has begun already—hasn't it?"

"It has already begun, as you say," said Vasserot, scratching his chin. "At the same time, it seems to me that it will be wiser that you should speak to

the little aunts yourself. They love you—the little aunts—and you can so much better explain to them the very great frequency with which you will return to this little house—and return yet again—and yet again. They will grow almost tired of seeing you, so great will be the frequency of your visits! Is it not so?"

His ugly face had expanded in a grin; Michael was properly indignant. "Why, of course. What do you mean? I shall be back here every day, and I daresay I shall be as much in this room as I am in the—other place—wherever it may happen to be."

"I have not an instant's doubt of it," said Vasserot, gravely.

Perhaps the better to strengthen that new resolution, Michael went that afternoon to see Celestine. But that, after all, proved a misery; because Nicholson Rawle was there; and Nicholson Rawle stayed the boy out, and was finally left behind when the boy came away. Celestine, as before, came out into the little hall of the flat, and turned a miserable, wanly-smiling face to him as she bade him farewell.

"This is not an afternoon to be remembered," she said. "And I wanted so much to see you and talk to you."

"I shall be able to see more of you now," he assured her. "I've got to be nearer things—nearer to the heart of my work. I talked it over with Vasserot this morning. You won't have to come out all the way to Hampstead to find me; I'm coming up this way. I'm going to take some rooms."

She looked at him for a moment or two in silence.

"That will be very nice," she said steadily; and turned abruptly away.

Michael chose that evening for the announcement. He had been very restless after his return, and the sisters had noticed that even Bathsheba's cooking seemed to pall upon him, and that he did not eat. They watched him where he sat listlessly; they glanced at each other. Even Vasserot was strangely silent; he found time to frown at the unfortunate Bathsheba, going hurriedly about her duties, and so to drive her to a worse confusion. At the end of the meal, while Vasserot was smoking one of the eternal cigarettes, Michael suddenly got up and followed the others into the drawing-room, only a moment or two after their reaching it themselves.

And then it all came out. He could never be grateful enough to the dear little aunts who had helped him; with very genuine tears in his eyes he expanded all that, and told them, again and again, that they had made his fortune for him, and that he was now on the very high road to success. With Stella's hand in his, and her perplexed and wondering blue eyes fixed upon his face, he told her and the little aunts that they had all brought love into his life; they had made his life what it was.

But it was necessary that he should go away, and that he should live actually in London. Even Vasserot had admitted that, though with reluctance; the good Gustave loved this little house, and all in it. And the good Gustave, coming in opportunely at that moment, corroborated this eagerly, and even with tears.

But in this new life the boy was leading (had they

not seen the life, and had they not heard the applause, and had they not read what even foolish and brainless critics said of the boy?) it was necessary that Michael should launch out; it was essential that great people, who could help him, should, at a moment's notice, be able to jump into a taxi, and in a matter of minutes find themselves in his presence. On the other hand, it was equally vital that Michael should be able to jump into a taxi, and to find himself, also in a matter of minutes, in the presence of those who desired to see him.

The expense was a little matter; Vasserot blew it away contemptuously in a mouthful of pungent smoke. Above all, the expense would be only temporary; in a little time Michael would be receiving money, at the mere mention of which the good Gustave held up hands of awe and admiration.

As Miss Dorcas unfastened the old cameo brooch at her throat that night, Miss Betsy, who was standing beside her for a minute or two before going to her own room, spoke to her own and her sister's reflection in the glass which stood on the dressing-table. "It won't make any real difference, my dear; we shall be still in touch with him, and he will come back to us—very, very often—won't he?"

"Stella will call him back to us; that's certain," said Miss Dorcas, stoutly, as she laid the brooch carefully down on the dressing-table.

And little Stella, in her room, stood with her hands covering her eyes, and gave a short dry sob when she thought of Michael gone out of the house; and then, in her prayers beside her little white bed, *craved that the sin of selfishness might be forgiven.*

CHAPTER XIII

ONE CROWDED HOUR

THERE is not the slightest doubt that Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy would have been delighted, when once the thing had been arranged, to set out then and there in search for rooms that should be suitable for Michael's use; they were perfectly certain in their own minds that they knew exactly the sort of thing the boy required. It was only with great difficulty that they were restrained by Vasserot from doing anything of the kind.

"The one thing to be particular about," said Miss Dorcas, impressively, "is that there should be a nice, comfortable, elderly woman to look after things; that is more important than anything else."

"And one has to be so careful that linen is properly aired, and that rooms are kept at an even temperature," murmured Miss Betsy.

"Dear ladies, the little Michael has wandered himself all over Europe, with no one to look after him, and no one to air his linen, or to keep him at a level temperature," protested Vasserot. "Leave all these matters to the good Gustave, who will sacrifice himself as he has ever done. It shall all be accomplished by the good Gustave."

So that Vasserot and the boy went off on success-

sive days together; and in the evening the sisters endeavored, with no success, to discover what sort of places they had been looking at, and above all, whether the buildings they had seen were fireproof.

At last Vasserot and Michael returned in triumph. They had discovered the very thing that was wanted. The rooms were quite near to the Haymarket; there was a huge room that could be used as a living-room; and there was a bedroom and a dressing-room and a bathroom. Moreover, the place was beautifully furnished, and the owner had gone abroad for an indefinite time.

"It is of a perfection!" exclaimed Vasserot, kissing his finger-tips in honor of it. "There the little Michael can see anyone at any time; the place is fit for a prince!"

The rent proved to be somewhat heavier than they could have imagined possible; but to the mind of Vasserot that was a little, stupid, sordid detail that was not worth talking about. It would require a little money just to start—the rent being payable in advance; but before another rent could be due Michael would be earning such an income that any mere matter of such a payment would be a thing for laughter. It had been a chance not to be missed; and Vasserot had hastened to secure the place at once, on behalf of the little Michael.

"You have taken it?" said Miss Dorcas, with a gasp.

"All is arranged—save for the payment of the little money," Vasserot announced calmly. "The person in charge informed me that already others were determined to secure the rooms; it was no moment for hesitation. I at once secured the rooms,

if only to ease the mind of the little master—which must never be unduly disturbed.”

It was all over and done with in a very short time; in fact, as Miss Betsy expressed it—“before they had time to turn round.” It was a mere packing of luggage and a cab at the door; and Michael standing, hat in hand, to say good-bye to them.

“It’s so silly to say good-bye,” he said, with his delightful smile. “I’m not really going away; I’ve left some things behind me in my room, so that I can come back here at any time. I shall worry you to death; I shall always be turning up unexpectedly, and ringing the bell. You’ll keep my room for me, won’t you?”

“Why, of course,” said Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy in a breath.

“And you must come down one day and see my rooms; they’re beautiful.”

The little aunts turned away discreetly when the boy took Stella’s hand. As he put his lips to hers for a moment, he said—“I shall come back very, very often to Memory Corner, dearest.”

Then he was gone, and the door was closed, and they were left together in that silent house. Perhaps it was only then that they realized all that the boy had meant to them; his cheeriness, and even his moods, and his laughter and his teasing. They went about their various little occupations very silently that day; they were in no mood for talk.

Late that evening Stella seated herself at that piano in the drawing-room which Vasserot had planted there, and played and sang. Vasserot had gone down to the new rooms with the boy, to see him established

there; they had no idea when he would return. Indeed, it was quite like one of the old evenings when presently Mrs. Fielding and Jimmie—and then, more surprisingly, the Major—made a call.

As a matter of fact Little Place, ever ready to watch new events discreetly from behind its windows, had seen Vasserot and the boy go away; that part of Little Place represented by Mrs. Fielding and the Major wanted to know all about it.

"It became necessary for dear Michael to be more actually *in* London—on account of professional engagements," said Miss Dorcas, a little haughtily for her.

"Consequently, he has taken rooms in a street near the Haymarket. He will be back here very frequently," supplemented Miss Betsy.

Once more the tray was brought in, containing decanters and glasses and the plate of mixed biscuits; and it was carried by Bathsheba. The Major followed the ungainly figure with his eyes as Bathsheba moved across the room; Mrs. Fielding also watched. When the door was closed again, Mrs. Fielding ventured a remark.

"A new importation?"

"Yes," said Miss Dorcas, faintly.

"Has Priscilla gone?" asked Mrs. Fielding.

"Yes"—it was Miss Betsy's turn—"Priscilla has gone to some relations. Major, will you mix for yourself?"

Jimmie sat in his old seat near to Stella; but now he did not watch her. She stole a glance at him once or twice; at the square, broad shoulders and the quiet face; somehow it seemed good to have him

there that evening. This man, who had never complained and who had never blamed her, seemed somehow in his silence greater than he had been before.

When presently everyone was going, she raised her eyes to him as she gave him her hand; she whispered a little shyly—"Thank you for coming, Jimmie; it has been nice to see you again."

Jimmie did an unusual thing. He laid his other hand quickly on the little one fluttering in his broad palm, and give it a little squeeze. Then he swung round and marched out of the house after the others.

Gustave Vasserot returned to the house very late. There had been thoughts in the minds of Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy that they should sit up for him; but it seemed more discreet that they should retire, and should leave Mary Ann (for by that name had Bathsheba been introduced, in her capacity as servant, into the house) to open the door. Nevertheless, feeling a little nervous, they had not gone to bed, but had sat together in Miss Dorcas's room, talking in whispers. There seemed to be so many things to talk about.

And then at last the bell rang, and after a pause rang again. Miss Dorcas had already made a movement toward the door of her room, with the intention of going down, when they heard the shuffling feet of the servant, and then the opening of the outer door.

"He's come in," whispered Miss Betsy, unnecessarily.

They heard a few gruff words in guttural tones in the little hall; and then silence. They knew, by after sounds, that Vasserot had gone into the dining-room, and that he was probably mixing a drink there.

Miss Betsy kissed her sister and gave her a whispered "Good-night," and went out on to the landing on the way to her own room. A moment later she opened the door again, and silently moved her head to indicate that she wanted to speak to Miss Dorcas. Both sisters wore their dressing-gowns, having only removed their dresses; they stood together on the landing, trembling and listening.

Sounds of talking came from the dining-room. They could hear Vasserot's voice—now up—now down; now commanding, and now pleading. They could hear another voice, on one continual long whining note, breaking in now and then. It seemed incredible—but surely that other voice belonged to Mary Ann.

"We ought to go down," murmured Miss Dorcas, fumbling for her sister's hand.

"I wonder what it can mean?" murmured Miss Betsy.

They went down, hand in hand, stealthily. In their bedroom slippers they came down into the little hall unheard; and there waited outside the door of the dining-room, which was partially open.

"It's always the sime," Bathsheba was saying. "Yer simply makes use of me—an' orders me orf—'ere, there or everyw'ere; I'm jist wot they call a chattel—that's wot I am. A bloomin' chattel!"

Here a sniff and a sob, before the voice of Vasserot broke in.

"God of the singing angels!—give me patience! Here stands a woman to whom I have done the greatest honor that could be conferred upon any female being—and yet she weeps and bellows, and smites herself upon the bosom! Here have I placed her in

a situation of the utmost respectability—a place where the food is good and the atmosphere of the highest morality. And she demands more!"

All this in a suppressed voice, with the sound of tramping up and down over the carpet. Now and then they knew that he had come near to the woman; they could picture him standing before her, shaking his fists in the air, and expostulating.

"I don't demand nuffink," said the whining voice. "I've got me marriage lines, and I asks yer to remember that. I don't want no honor or glory—nor any truck like that. I on'y wants ter be treated fair an' decent. I slaves away in the kitchen, an' waits on yer 'and an' foot—an' wot do I git out of it? A nod, p'raps, on the stairs, or summink like that. An' nah yer talkin' abaht goin' away."

("I think perhaps we ought to go in," murmured Miss Dorcas in her sister's ear.)

"It has become necessary that I should go away; that is very true. You that have the brain of a mouse cannot possibly understand why I go away; you are not to be reasoned with. For the present you will remain here, and will do as I bid you. It is sufficient."

Miss Dorcas suddenly gripped Miss Betsy's hand, and with great daring stepped into the room. On that sudden entry Vasserot stopped, in the very act of shaking his fists in his wife's face, and paused in that attitude to look at the sisters. Then, with a shrug of the shoulders and a deprecatory movement of his hands, he turned away, leaving Bathsheba to face the little ladies.

"Mary Ann—Mr. Vasserot—what is this?" demanded Miss Dorcas, shaking from head to foot.

Vasserot grinned, and came slowly toward her. "Ladies—it is a calamity that you, with your innocent and your tender hearts, should have come upon me—a great artist always—mark you that!—at the moment when I am bowed in shame before the great blunder of my life. Ladies—I tremble before you; you shall say to me just what you like."

"But we don't understand," stammered Miss Betsy. "Mary Ann—what are you doing down here at this hour?"

"Permit me, ladies, to give the explanation," broke in Vasserot, quickly. "Figure to yourselves that a long time ago—when I was but a callow youth, inexperienced in the world—"

"You was a lot older than wot I was," said Bathsheba, with a sniff.

"Be silent, little one; leave all to me," exclaimed Vasserot, impatiently, with a snapping of his thumb and forefinger. "At a time when the world faced me as a bleak and horrible place—a place of starvation—I met this woman. She assisted me with certain little monies she had in what you call your Post Office. I was grateful to tears; I am often grateful to tears. I over-rated what she had done; I gave her for it a very, very great return. I married her."

The sisters gasped, and glanced at each other; and then glanced at Bathsheba. Vasserot went on, in a tone half-blustering and half-pleading:

"I have always been gentle to her, and I have, whenever possible, drawn her to my side. She is a poor thing—but I am always filled with a very great sense of duty. When she told me that she was in a condition of helplessness, I said to myself—'Why

should I be living here, with the kind little ladies who feed me and lodge me—while the woman who bears my name—however unworthy she may be—remains outside?" I was stirred, ladies, to my depths; I said to myself that it was a great injustice. And I brought her here!"

"You did not tell us who she was," suggested Miss Dorcas.

"For that I am to blame," he exclaimed grandiloquently. "I ask your forgiveness. I should have trusted your gentle hearts; I should have told you all. Bathsheba," he added sternly—"you should have compelled me to tell these ladies all. In not compelling me you did wrong."

"It seems that she has a different name," said Miss Betsy.

"It was a name conferred upon her in infancy; I use it at times, as an expression of tenderness," answered Vasserot, blandly.

"But what is she doing here now—and why is she crying?" asked Miss Dorcas.

"Says 'e's goin' away," said Bathsheba, with her apron to her eyes, and catching her breath in a sob.

"It is necessary—for the sake of the little master—that I go from this place," said Vasserot. "I do all things for the sake of the little master. I have taken a room near to him—a mere cupboard, in which I can with difficulty twist myself. All this I would have told you, ladies—to-morrow."

"An' wot's goin' ter become o' me?" demanded Bathsheba.

Vasserot shrugged his shoulders and laughed; turned to the sisters, as one who asked what a man

with a poor unfortunate burden like this was to do; and then dropped a hand on Bathsheba's shoulder and shook her rallyingly.

"It is a little imbecile—with but the brain of a mouse!" he said, with some gentleness. "Did it think that the poor Gustave was going to let it to starve? Has the poor Gustave ever left it to starve? It is my intention, when I remove myself from this place, to take you with me. Peace! I need no thanks."

"You don't mean it?" breathed Bathsheba, removing her apron from her eyes.

"I have spoken—and the matter is accomplished," he said. "Besides, in my garret I shall need someone to look after me and to cook for me. The thing is settled." He turned with a bow to the sisters. "I have troubled you greatly, ladies, and at an hour abominable; I crave your forgiveness. Bathsheba—to your room!"

It was long before the sisters got to sleep; they sat together, and talked in whispers—hushed and terrified whispers, with glances at the closed door. Miss Betsy summed the matter up when at last she kissed her sister and bade her good-night.

"Some terrible things have happened in this house, my dear. Let's try not to think of them; let's try to sleep."

In the strangest fashion the pair went away the next morning, after Vasserot had eaten a surprisingly large breakfast, with Bathsheba humbly waiting upon him. The sisters had some difficulty in reconciling themselves to calling the woman "Mary Ann"; they glanced apologetically at Vasserot when they did so.

It would have been so much more proper, they felt, and yet quite impossible, to call her "Mrs. Vasserot."

Bathsheba came up from the kitchen, and waited patiently in the little hall until Vasserot came out of the dining-room, and commanded her to go and find a cab. Even when she found it she did not dare to get inside, but came trotting back along Little Place with the cab in front of her. Vasserot, with magnificent gestures, directed the cabman to assist Bathsheba with the luggage, and directed the girl to get inside; then he went back to take a characteristic farewell of Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy.

"I do but go to look after the little master—and to direct him," he said. "But for that I could not have borne it—to tear myself away from this place of great quietness and peace—this place that has been my home. Ah—how I shall remember it—with what tenderness shall I not think of it! And I shall come often with the little master to see you—often and often!"

He kissed their hands, and looked round the shabby little drawing-room, as though taking leave of it; sighed heavily, and smiled at the same moment; and went away.

So the quiet life began again for the sisters and for Stella. At first it seemed incredible that all those who had so suddenly swept into their lives should be swept out of them again, without leaving a trace. They talked of Michael in the quiet evenings, and wondered what he was doing, and when he would sing again; and on those nights which had, before his coming, stood out as small landmarks, the Major and Flora Fielding—and sometimes Jimmie—put in an

appearance; and Mrs. Fielding and the Major played whist with Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy. All quite in the old way, as though nothing had happened to change their lives in between.

Then one day Miss Dorcas arrived at a great decision. She and Miss Betsy, although they never voiced the matter, had been more than a little troubled that they had heard nothing from Michael or from Vasserot. When they spoke of him, it was merely to excuse his absence—he had been very busy—and it would take him a long time to settle down in his new rooms, and quite a lot of people would be going to see him and detaining him. Stella said nothing; she only moved about the house in a listless fashion, or sat with her hands folded in her lap.

Once, when the girl had been playing softly in the drawing-room for some time in the twilight, Miss Betsy, opening the door quietly, looked in to find her seated before the piano with her face hidden in her hands. Miss Betsy closed the door and went away.

And now Miss Dorcas had come to the great resolve. It was absurd that they should wait, and expect Michael to come to them; why should they not go and see Michael? Miss Dorcas jested about it; she murmured something about Mahomet and the mountain.

“I expect Michael is quite hurt that we haven’t been before this,” said Miss Dorcas. “Let us go this very afternoon.”

So they went. It was a great expedition for them; because not only had they to look out for all the hidden dangers that lurked for them in that wider *world of London*, but also they had to keep Stella

carefully between them, and to fling haughty glances at men who dared to cast eyes in the direction of the girl. But at last they reached the Haymarket, and found that street wherein Michael's rooms were situated.

They climbed the stairs, past various offices and agencies, and what not, becoming aware as they climbed of an increasing sound of music. And at last stood outside a door, with a little plate upon it on which Michael's name was engraved. Miss Dorcas knocked softly on the door, but received no answer; they could hear the piano, and the sound of someone singing.

"Perhaps we'd better go in," suggested Miss Betsy. And they opened the door and went in.

There was a screen in front of the door, and, a little hesitatingly, they passed round this—to find themselves in a big room, with quite a number of people in it. Vasserot was seated at a grand piano, playing, with his eyes cast up to the ceiling; and beside him was a stout man, singing in a deep voice. At a table on which tea was arranged sat Miss Celestine Wilde, pouring out the tea, and talking to Michael, who stood beside her, in whispers. Other people were sitting or standing about the room, listening to the singer.

It was Celestine Wilde who first saw the amazed and disconcerted visitors. She laid a hand on Michael's arm and whispered; he turned his head sharply, and got to his feet. And then tip-toed across to them, and grasped their hands nervously, and drew them into the room. There the three stood, awkwardly

enough, beside the boy, until the song was finished and the applause had died away.

"How perfectly charming of you to come and look me up!" the boy exclaimed, keeping hold of Stella's hand, and leading them over to the tea-table. "Miss Wilde—have you any tea left? I think you know Miss Wilde—don't you, Stella dear?"

Stella bowed, a little disturbed by the eyes of the older woman at the tea-table. Places were found for the little aunts, who sat down decorously. They felt so much at a loss that they were quite glad that they knew Vasserot and could shake hands with him.

"Is it possible that the little ladies have arrived themselves here?" exclaimed Vasserot, with many shrugs, and with his face one vast ugly smile. "You find the little Michael surrounded by those who love him—all great people—at least, in their own estimation," he murmured behind his hand. "And the little canary—who has come quite a long way to see her little master. Ah—it is a great day!"

Celestine had made the girl sit beside her. Very quietly she explained who the people were; she hinted that she had been able to bring them there because she knew them. That big man in the corner there, looking rather bored—yes—that man with the Jewish face—he was a great impresario; it had taken worlds of trouble to induce him to come at all. In a few moments Michael would be singing—and if only the great one in the corner with the Jewish face would stay to listen!

Vasserot presently came across to Michael, and whispered urgently; the boy got up, and strolled across to the piano with Vasserot. Miss Dorcas and

Miss Betsy put down their tea-cups; their hands were shaking a little. Stella found her fingers clasped in a warm, strong hand; she glanced round into the eyes of Celestine.

"You're not nervous?"

"Not—not very," answered the girl.

"It's all right. I'm never nervous when Michael sings," whispered the other.

And Michael sang. And as he sang, that curious hush fell upon all those in the room that knew what singing was; Stella noticed that one or two of them put a hand over their eyes, as though to shut out everything else but the voice. She noticed, too—and was first aware of it by a harder pressure on her fingers—that the man of the Jewish face in a corner of the room had moved slightly, and had opened his eyes; and then had half closed them again, and was listening, with a little very slow movement of his head in time to the music.

There was no tumult of applause from that audience when the last notes died away—only a little stirring and rustling, and the mere breath of a sigh, as though a wind had passed over them. And Michael bowing here and there, and going quietly back to the tea-table. The man of the Jewish face was talking quietly to Vasserot—talking lazily, and with glances round about him, as though not interested in the matter at all. Presently he went away, with half the room watching him as he went.

Very soon Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy rose also, with glances at Stella to show her that now was the time for them all to take their departure. Michael was a little excited, for Vasserot had come to him.

and had whispered again urgently in his ear. At that second whisper the boy, with a delighted face, had caught at Vasserot, and had asked eager questions.

"Oh, you good old Gustave! It's wonderful!" he exclaimed.

Therefore, in this new excitement, and with half a dozen people crowding about him, to talk to him all at once, it was scarcely surprising that he let them go—the two little ladies and Stella—almost with a hand-shake and no more. Yet at the last he thrust Vasserot aside, and darted after them; caught them on the stairs outside.

"You dears—I haven't had a chance of a word with you," he said, speaking to the three of them, but holding Stella's hand. "Soon I'm coming up to see you; I want to have you all to myself for an hour or two—in the dear little house—in Memory Corner! I'm always thinking about you—always."

"You will always find us very glad to see you, Michael," said Miss Dorcas.

"We shall watch for your coming," said Miss Betsy. "We are always at home, as you know."

As they went down the stairs he drew Stella toward him and kissed her. "I'll come back one day—when all this rush and hurry is over—to nestle in that quiet heart where I want to hide myself," he whispered. "Do you remember our talk?"

"I can never forget," she answered him, smiling; and went away happy.

But he did not go back. Day by day the girl started at the sound of a ring of the door-bell; evening by evening the little ladies sat at their work in the faded old drawing-room; and sometimes Stella played and

sang to them. But no boyish voice was ever heard in the little house—no quick opening of a door brought them to their feet with glad faces.

They had news of him. Though they did not know it, the bored-looking gentleman of the Jewish countenance had done something after all; and Michael had gone on, at a moment's notice, in "Rigoletto," and had created something of a sensation. But they only heard that through a chance paragraph which Miss Betsy discovered in a morning paper.

Michael Doran ran upstairs two steps at a time one afternoon to his rooms and opened the door; as he passed round the screen he stopped, with a jerk and an exclamation. A big man was standing in the window, with his back to the room, and his hands clasped behind him; the big man was Jimmie Fielding.

"Forgive this intrusion," said Jimmie, quietly, as he turned round. "The woman downstairs evidently thought I was respectable, and told me I could wait for you. She let me in."

"I'm very glad to see you," said Michael, tossing his hat on to a chair. "How did you find me?"

"I happened to hear the address mentioned one night when I was calling on—on Miss Dorcas," said Jimmie, awkwardly.

There was a pause, while Michael, on his way to the piano, glanced at the big figure of Jimmie with a little annoyed and perplexed frown on his face. The piano seemed to be Michael's natural refuge; he sat down there and ran his fingers over the keys. There was an awkward pause, and then Michael, still playing softly, spoke without looking up.

"I hope you did not have long to wait?"

"Only a few minutes, thank you," replied Jimmie. And suddenly marched across the room, and leaned over the end of the piano, and looked at the boy. "Look here—can you listen to me for a minute or two?"

"I am listening," replied Michael, still playing softly.

The other frowned a little at the music, but went on patiently. "I've been meaning to come to you for some time, but couldn't make up my mind."

"I am pleased to see you," said Michael. And the music still went on.

"Drop that!" exclaimed Jimmie, savagely. "And for God's sake drop your music for a minute; music isn't everything in life."

The music finished with a flourish, and Michael got up. "Music is everything in life to me," he said, standing with his legs planted apart in front of the other man.

"I suppose you remember a talk we once had on the Heath?" said Jimmie, slowly. "I mean that day when we walked back together—for Stella to choose between us."

"I remember it perfectly."

"I was a fool that day," said Jimmie; "because I might have known just what she would say; I might have been certain that I had no chance. But if it had happened that of the two of us she had turned to me, I should at least have treated her well. At least, I think I should."

"What are you suggesting?" asked Michael, with a flush on his pale face.

"I'm suggesting that you might give up the music

a little for the sake of the girl"—Jimmie gulped, and shifted on his feet—"who loves you. I suppose you don't think of her in that dull little house, with only two old ladies to talk to; I suppose you don't think—"

"Pardon me," broke in the boy, quickly—"but I do think of her very often."

"I doubt it very much," said Jimmie, bluntly. "You can't be always at your piano-playing and your singing. Why can't you find time to go down and see her?"

The boy turned away, and walked to the window; he looked back from there to fling a question over his shoulder. "And what business is it of yours?"

"Well—I'll tell you," said Jimmie, heavily. "If you're very fond of a thing you don't like to see it hurt—or to see it suffer—do you? Well, I'm very fond of someone—and God knows what I wouldn't do to bring any sunshine into her life. I can't bring the sunshine myself; I'm out of the game; but you can. Do you suppose I like to come here and talk to you in this fashion?"

There was a long pause, while Michael drummed with his finger-tips on the window. At last, without looking round, he asked, almost in a whisper:

"Is she well?"

Jimmie laughed a little bitterly. "If you asked anyone that saw her every day—say her aunts, for instance—they'd tell you that she was very well indeed. I suppose I look at her with other eyes. She"—he fumbled with the words, and then brought them out with a rush—"she's waiting for the bell to ring; she listens for it."

The boy turned abruptly away from the window,

and walked up to the other man. "I—I'm glad you came," he said, with that quick, charming earnestness that always drew anyone instantly to him—"it was good of you. I've been a brute—a forgetful, careless brute. Music's the finest thing in life or in the world—but it makes men beasts sometimes; they put it in front of everything else. I hadn't forgotten; but I've simply let the days slip by—"

"I'm quite sure of that," answered Jimmie, generously. "You're lucky to have it in your power to make anyone happy, as you can make her; and I wouldn't throw that power away, if I were you. Go back to her—and see her often." He turned his head away while he spoke.

"I'll go back at once; I'll see her as soon as I can," answered Michael, eagerly.

There was a knock at the door. The boy called out, and the next moment Celestine Wilde came round the screen, with a slow smile on her face. She stopped a little awkwardly at seeing Jimmie; and then, as Michael introduced them, held out her hand.

"Surely we've met before," she said, in her deep voice. "You were at the first concert?"

"Where I had the pleasure of hearing you sing," said Jimmie. "I remember it very well. I must be going, Doran," he added, turning to Michael and holding out his hand.

"I'm not driving you away?" murmured Celestine.

"Not in the least—thank you; I only looked in for a moment—just a matter of business."

When Jimmie had bowed heavily and was gone, Celestine looked with a smile at Michael, who was



pacing about the room. "Anything the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing the matter at all," he replied, a little petulantly. "What should be the matter?"

Celestine seated herself and looked at him whimsically. "What a child it is!" she thought. Aloud she said, in a careless tone—"Didn't I see your friend with the little Stella on the night of the concert? I thought I remembered his face."

"Yes—Fielding is a great friend of hers—known her since she was a baby; he lives in the adjoining house to her."

"And came to look you up—eh?" said Celestine.

Michael stopped in front of her; he smiled a little ruefully. "I've always got to be honest with you," he said. "The man came to remind me that I hadn't been to see Stella, and that I ought to be ashamed of myself—which, of course, is true."

"What a singular man!" remarked Celestine. "Is he in love with her?"

"He was—very much in love with her," answered Michael. And then, a little impatiently, "There—it's all over and done with; I'm going to see Stella immediately—perhaps this evening. Let us talk about something else. You don't bully me, or remind me of duties unfulfilled; you rest me somehow. Rest me now," he demanded whimsically; "I'm all on edge!"

And for a night or two Jimmie Fielding kept watch in Little Place, Hampstead. If anyone turned into that quiet street, Jimmie stopped and watched, and then, disappointed, paced on again. But one night, when he had got to the end of Little Place, just outside the Major's house, and had turned to go back, a

light, quick figure swung in and advanced to No. 3. Jimmie heard a taxi-cab starting, and knew that the boy had just dismissed it, and was walking the few yards down to No. 3. Contented, he went back to his mother's house.

Michael was very happy that night. He had the glowing consciousness of feeling that he was doing the right thing; he was extremely well-dressed, and he was very certain of his welcome. After he had rung the bell he stood for a moment, with his hands deep in the pockets of his fur-lined overcoat, just murmuring a little air to himself.

A new maid—young and pretty—opened the door to him. He smiled at her, and then, while she still looked at him in perplexity, he dropped his hat on the hall table, and began to unfasten his coat. And just at that moment the drawing-room door was opened, and Stella came out.

She cried out at sight of him; and in a moment, without taking the faintest notice of the round-eyed little servant, the boy took Stella straight into his arms; and then twisted her round, and went with her into the drawing-room. Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy had risen as one person, and stood waiting for him.

"I've come back to you," he cried, slipping off the fur coat, and letting it drop upon the floor; he stood revealed in full evening dress. "I felt that I couldn't stay away any longer; I've just come back—if only for an hour or two. Won't anyone say they're glad to see little Michael again?"

Miss Dorcas had picked up the fur coat very carefully, and had carried it out into the hall. When she came back she found that the boy had actually

got an arm round the austere waist of Miss Betsy, and was hugging her rapturously.

"Aunt Betsy," he exclaimed, "you're looking younger and prettier every day of your life."

And Aunt Betsy, very pleased, and with a pretty color in her face, wriggled away from him, and told him to tell those things to Stella.

It was a wonderful evening—an evening to be marked by a white stone. The boy was at his very gayest; never had they found him so charming, so whimsical, or with so many turns and twists in his sunny nature. Miss Dorcas, being quite certain that he had not had any supper, went out to the kitchen herself, and cut sandwiches for him; Miss Betsy went with her. It took quite a long time to cut the sandwiches—long enough for Michael and Stella to sit happily side by side on the little faded old couch, and to talk to each other as only lovers may talk.

"Although I haven't been near you, my darling," said the boy, holding her hand, and going through that old delicate trick of separating the fingers and kissing each one of them, "I've always been thinking of you. But you see that mine is such a busy life—so many people to see, and so many others to come and see me, I don't get much time to myself. But to-night I got away—to-night I said, 'I must go and see her; I can't wait any longer. I must go back to Memory Corner—beloved of my little dead mother—and I must find myself again in the place where my little mother dreamed of love and where I have dreamed of it too.'"

"I know, I know," the girl whispered, with a light hand upon his lips. "I don't want you to say any

more, Michael dear—I am more than contented. And it was like you to make up your mind suddenly, and come straight away here. How long will you stay?"

"I don't know; don't let's talk of that," he exclaimed. "Let it be sufficient that I am here—and that, for a time at least, I remain here. What does it matter? I have never thought in all my life of what the next hour was to bring me; I could not bear to think of what the next hour was to bring me." He shuddered a little, and drew her closer to him. "Live for the moment, my dearest—and for the moment only."

"I live for my memories—and for a night like this," she whispered.

The sisters surprisingly raised their voices outside the door when they brought in the sandwiches; it might almost have been said, though it was quite incredible, that Miss Dorcas was "having words" with Miss Betsy. But they came in beaming, with a tray with the sandwiches upon it, and a decanter of wine and some glasses. And for a time they were all very merry.

No one had a word to say about the lateness of the hour; they were too happy for that. And presently Michael seated himself at the piano, and played softly and sang. It was such a perfect gathering of just these people that loved each other that Stella sat close beside him, and while he played and sang, laid her soft cheek against his shoulder. Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy did not even exchange glances; they watched Michael and the girl, and thought, perhaps, in their serene, innocent hearts, how wonderful young life and young love could be.

He sang delicate little things that charmed them to light laughter and almost to tears. He sang softly—just breathing out the notes, with his young face uplifted and his eyes smiling.

With the bare thickness of a wall between them, another man sat, with his elbows propped on his knees, and his face hidden in his hands—the man who had brought Michael to that house. Mrs. Fielding had gone to bed a long time before; and Jimmie's pipe was out, and the fire had died down. He could hear the music through the wall, coming to him in a softened fashion; and he sat there, lonely, and wondered just where they were sitting, and what they talked about, and if by any chance anyone remembered him.

And then, at an absurdly late hour, Michael suddenly said that he must be going. In answer to their protests he told them that he had an early appointment in the morning, and that he must get back to his bed, and must get some sleep. Yes—yes—the little room upstairs was delightful, and nothing would have pleased him better than to have slept in it. Some other time he would do that; to-night he must get away. And what a wonderful night it had been, he assured them with smiles.

Stella helped him on with the fur coat. At the last moment he boyishly drew her to him, and wrapped the heavy coat about her, and kissed her; and this night, for the first time, he boyishly kissed the little aunts before he went away. They stood shivering in the little hall, and watching him, with happy faces, as he stood for a moment out on the pavement, with bared head, whimsically bowing to them. He would

find a cab somewhere that would take him home. And now—good-night!

With the door closed, they recovered themselves a little, and looked at each other with quick sighs and with little smiles. "Isn't he wonderful?" breathed Miss Betsy, as she went back into the drawing-room, and collected some of the scattered music he had been turning over.

"I wonder when he'll come again?" said Miss Dorcas.

CHAPTER XIV

CAPS OVER WINDMILLS

MICHAEL DORAN had fully determined that this should be but one of many visits. Even as he left the house, he was mapping out in his own mind exactly what he would do in the near future. He would swoop down upon the house now and then, just as he had done to-night; he would masterfully call upon Stella to put on that white frock and a cloak, and he would take her down into the London she did not know—that London of lights and music and gaiety; and she should dine with him, and see all there was to be seen.

Also, it would be rather good fun to include the little aunts in one such festivity; Michael chuckled to himself when he pictured their tremors and their hesitation. Yes—he must certainly take out the little aunts.

But the days went on; and there was so much to fill each one of them, and so many people to be seen, that each night it fell to his lot to remember with a pang that he ought to have gone to Little Place. However, he would go to-morrow; he must manage to squeeze in the time somehow. It wasn't right nor just nor fair for him to stay away.

The old unhappy restless business of visiting Celestine went on intermittently. He would drift round

there, without meaning to go there at all; and now the maid always admitted him without question. Sometimes he found Nicholson Rawle there, and then the two would sit, almost without speaking; until the boy had at last to get up and go away, leaving the two together. He chafed at that; he remembered that wonderful afternoon when she had knelt beside the lounge, and had talked to him out of her very soul. He used to walk about, after seeing her like that, and think about her, and then drift back to his rooms late at night—to find them cold and empty.

Vasserot was in and out at all hours—full of plans that were fast coming to fruition. He made the boy work hard; he was for ever polishing that matchless voice that to everyone else seemed flawless.

It happened one evening that Michael made up his mind—and made it up quite definitely—that he would go off to Little Place, and would spend the evening there. He had had a hard and troublesome day; he had been a creature of moods and had even had a heated scene with Vasserot. Vasserot had done his best to control his own temper for fear of exciting the boy, but had not quite succeeded. And finally had gone back to his own place and to Bathsheba, after banging the door of Michael's rooms behind him.

Michael was instantly sorry. He was in a mood to call Vasserot back, and explain, and apologize, and smooth the big fellow down; but while he thought about it he knew that Vasserot was well on his way home.

Then it was that he made up his mind to go to Little Place. The mere thought of that elated him at once; he wished he had thought of it before. He

would dress, and would get a cab and drive down there—they should give him a little simple supper, and it would all be delightful.

"I need someone or something to soothe me to-night," he said to himself. "And these rooms are horrible when they're empty; they give me the shivers. Why the deuce didn't I keep Vasserot here, instead of quarreling with him, and sending him off like that?"

He turned on all the lights, and made up the fire, and then went to dress. He sang light-heartedly over that business of dressing, and finally came out into the big room, smiling to himself to think how pleased they would all be to welcome him. He had left a suit of clothes and some things for the night down at Little Place; it would not be at all a bad idea to stay there for once, and breakfast with them, and go for a walk over the Heath with Stella in the morning. That was a very fine idea indeed.

While he stood there, thinking about it, there came a soft knock at the door. Frowning a little, he strode across to the door and opened it; Celestine stood there, looking in at him.

"Are you all alone?" she whispered, as she craned forward.

"Quite. Won't you come in?"

She passed swiftly round the screen, and he closed the door. As he came back into the room she saw his coat lying across a chair; she stopped, with a little blank look of dismay on her face.

"You were going out?"

"Well—I was," he answered slowly, with a smile. "But there's no hurry."

She turned irresolutely, and seated herself; she

stared into the fire. Then suddenly she turned her head, and looked at him, and stretched out a hand to him. Scarcely knowing what he did, he moved across to her, and took the hand, and stood looking down at her.

“Do you know what it feels like to wait all day for someone?” she asked. “I mean—just to wait and wait, and listen for a ring at the bell, to know in your heart of hearts that there’s a footstep on the stairs, and that it’s the footstep you’re expecting?”

He might have remembered then that someone else, in a little house hard by Hampstead, was listening for a bell to ring and for a footstep to sound; but, looking into Celestine’s eyes, he forgot.

“I think I know what you mean,” he answered.

“If ever I wanted anyone in all my life I wanted my friend Michael to-day,” she said. “I wanted you—just to talk to—and just to listen to me. And now you’re going out.”

“Not necessarily,” said the boy. “Another night will do as well—quite as well. Are you in trouble?”

She shrugged her shoulders, and pulled away the hand he held. “What should trouble me?” she demanded. “It’s only the old ache—the old purposeless stupid longing—a sort of grown-up crying for the moon— Where were you going to-night?”

“I was going across to see Stella,” he answered. “But to-morrow night—or any other night, will do as well.”

“No, it won’t,” she said, getting up. “The time has gone past for me to separate young hearts even for an hour. Go and see the little blue-eyed girl; I don’t mind in the least.”

She moved slowly toward the door; Michael hesitated for a moment, and then called out to her—"I say—wait a minute."

She came back, looking at him with that slow, wistful smile of hers. "What's the use of waiting?" she asked.

"When you came in here just now—before you discovered that I was going out—what did you want to say? I shall hate myself if you go away like this."

"My dear!" She raised her eyebrows, and looked at him whimsically. "It's not so serious as all that. I merely had a mood that I wanted to see the one real friend I've got in the world—that's all. If you want to know the actual truth, I said to myself—'I want Michael to-night; I hate myself, and I hate my rooms, and I hate everything else. Michael will smooth me down, and perhaps he'll make me laugh.' There's the whole business for you."

"But that's exactly what I was saying before you came in," cried the boy. "That was really why I was going off to see Stella." He walked up to her, and looked into her face with an impudent smile. "Look here—we both want consoling, and our rough edges rubbed down; come out to dinner with me."

She hesitated. "Shall you mind very much?"

"I shall like it above all things," he exclaimed. "Don't stop to think; come now—at once. It's never wise to stop to think—is it?"

"Heaven knows I don't want to stop to think to-night!" she said enigmatically. Then, on her way to the door, she asked suddenly—"But did she expect you to-night?"

"Not a bit; I was going to take her by surprise," answered Michael.

She looked relieved. "Oh, then it's all right. Only you must promise me that you'll go and see her to-morrow."

"I'll promise you anything," he declared lightly.

They drove to a quiet little restaurant in a side street—a place so quiet that their entrance attracted some attention. Celestine sat down and began to pull off her gloves; and while she did that she looked with soft eyes at the boy, who, grave-faced, was considering the menu. After all, this was a perfect rounding-off of her day—and she was not doing any harm. Soon he would marry his blue-eyed little sweetheart, and would be content to forget this other woman, who had come merely into the singing life of him, and had not touched the real life at all. So, at least, she told herself.

It must be said of her that she had the extraordinary capacity for forgetting everything but the actual moment before her. Now, with the handsome face of the boy at the other side of the table, all else was forgotten and left behind; she saw only him, and remembered that this was their evening together, and that she had him to herself. She refused to think that to-morrow he would have gone to see the little blue-eyed girl, and would have forgotten all about this evening and this Celestine who watched him with such hunger in her heart.

They chattered away merrily over their food and their wine; they lingered over the dinner as long as possible. When at last it was finished, and he had paid the bill, she said, as she pulled on her gloves,

"Won't you come back to my place? After all this—I should hate to go back alone. I told you I hated myself to-night; and you have taken me out of myself, and soothed me, and put me on my feet again. Come back with me, and talk to me; then, the moment you leave me, I'll jump into bed, and only wake to my sorrows"—she smiled a little wistfully—"tomorrow morning."

"I'll come back with pleasure," he answered at once.

They drove back to her rooms, and there for a long time they sat—Celestine smoking—and were sometimes silent, and sometimes talkative—but for the most part silent. It was near to midnight when she roused herself, and threw the last cigarette into the fire, and got to her feet. Michael rose also.

"You've been dear and good to me to-night," she said. "I wonder why it is that I talk to you as I never talk to anyone else? You don't laugh at me, or brush me aside; you simply understand. I think you must have the biggest heart of anyone in the world."

"But I'm so fond of you—you've been so good to me," he murmured, as he put his lips to her hand.

"I'm glad to think that you are fond of me; I shall be glad to remember that—very often," she said.

He forgot that promise to go to Little Place on the following day; something stood in the way. Perhaps, for one thing, he had to set Celestine in a new perspective; had to see her as a delightful woman, vaguely troubled, who had placed him in the proud position of being the one man to whom she talked as she talked to no one else. He wanted to think about her—to get her into that new perspective, and to view her from another standpoint. She had touched

his pity and his chivalry; he had a vague wish that he could help her.

Two days later, still with that feeling in his mind that he wanted to help her, he called at her flat. He was shown into the big, untidy drawing-room by the maid; and there sat Nicholson Rawle, with his half-closed eyes glinting a little amusedly at the boy. Rawle nodded as Michael was shown in, and then relapsed into his usual inert condition.

Celestine made an attempt at conversation—chiefly about music; she even sat down at the piano and played, and sang something under her breath. And still Rawle sat on there, in his dogged fashion, until presently Michael got up and went away. This time she did not come out into the little hall with him; she shook hands with him quietly, with a half smile, and let him go. And he went away baffled and miserable.

She went back into the room, and dropped on to the lounge; and, without looking at Rawle, took up a cigarette and lighted it. The man watched her for a moment or two, and then, seemingly pulling himself together with an effort, broke the silence with a question:

“Our young friend is a bit of a sticker—isn’t he?”

She did not reply. She looked round into the fire, and flicked the ash off the end of her cigarette. After a pause the man went on again:

“How long are you going to keep him dangling after you?” he asked. “I should have thought you would have got tired of the game by this time; the young cub hasn’t much to say for himself.”

She looked round at him with raised eyebrows. “You are something of a damper, you know, Nick,”

she said. "He talks to me at other times—and he interests me very much."

There was another pause, then Rawle leaned forward in his chair and spoke with a new note in his voice—a note of quiet persistence. "Look here—you're treating me rather badly, you know. Don't you think so?"

"I haven't thought about it at all," she replied, without looking at him.

"I'm playing a part I never played in my life before," he went on quietly—"a part I wouldn't play for any other woman but yourself. I'm playing the part of the poor, patient fool that sits by quietly, and waits—and keeps on waiting. And it's a part that doesn't suit me."

"God knows that's true enough," she retorted harshly.

"I've offered you all that a man can offer; and I ask you now—when are you going to marry me?"

"I don't know. If it comes to that, I'm not sure that I'm going to marry you at all."

"I think you are," he said patiently. "And while we're on the subject—has it ever occurred to you just what you're doing for this boy?"

She looked round at him sharply; there was a hard glitter in her eyes. "What are you talking about?" she asked quickly.

"I think you know. The young fool is in love with you. If you told him that, it would come as something of a shock to him, because he doesn't understand it yet himself; he doesn't realize it. When he does realize it, as he must, sooner or later—look out for yourself."

"You'd better explain," she said slowly.

"You're much too clever a woman to need any explanation," he said. "When he discovers that he's in love with you—and he's a bit of a volcano, that boy, if I'm any judge of faces—what are you going to do with him? He's not a bad sort, as boys go; there's only his youth against him. Are you going to send him to the devil headlong—as you sent someone else some years ago?"

"For pity's sake, Nick!" She got up hurriedly, and moved across the room. "You don't know what you're talking about; that's all past and done with. This boy is the sweetest, cleanest thing I've met; I'm not going to do him any harm."

"You can't help yourself," he retorted. "Why can't you be sensible, and have done with all this? Don't we understand each other well enough for you to take me as you find me—just as I'm prepared to take you as I know you? Marry me—and let the boy go about his business."

"Not yet. Not yet," she said hurriedly, without looking at him. "Some day, perhaps—but not yet."

Rawle presently lounged away, leaving her to herself. And for a long time she swept up and down the room, pausing every now and then, deep in thought, and then going on again. The maid, coming in an hour afterward, found her still going up and down the room, heeding nothing.

The cool, deliberate words spoken by Rawle had bitten into her very soul; perhaps for the first time she began to face facts, even though she refused to accept them. She had the delight of a vain woman

in wondering just how far she could go before the inevitable pulling-up process must begin.

And in the meantime Rawle was clever enough to see that his prize was slipping away from him. He had boasted that she would marry him, and at the time had believed it, but now he was not so sure of her as he had been before. He knew enough of her to know that if he could catch her in a certain mood of bitterness he might wring a promise from her he could not do at any other time. And in that matter he was fortunate; for he one day found her in the mood.

Michael had not been to see her for some days. That was partly accidental, and partly because it had always seemed to happen lately that Rawle was sitting in the room, and that there was no chance of any intimate conversation with her. Once or twice, indeed, the boy had gone almost to the door of the flat, and then had turned away again. Celestine, chafing at the thought that that midsummer madness was over, began to tell herself that she hated Michael, and that she wished she had never seen him. That was the mood which possessed her when Nicholson Rawle went in one afternoon and found her lying on the big lounge, sulkily smoking.

He began to talk to her—at first about ordinary topics that might possibly interest her; and then about that one topic that always interested himself, to the exclusion of all others. And this time he had the wisdom not to talk about Michael.

“I’ve been thinking of going abroad,” he said carelessly—“going somewhere where the sun shines, and where one needn’t wear a blanket of an overcoat. I

think I shall go where there are some lively people, and a Casino, and that sort of thing. A little later I shall drift on to Egypt."

He had drawn his chair beside the lounge; he let the words drop out lazily as he looked into the fire. The woman seemed to see him wandering about Europe in that fashion—just drifting on from place to place—and alone. She did him the justice to believe that he would be alone. She did not speak; she watched him, without moving, while he watched the fire. Presently he sat up, and looked at her with a half smile.

"I shall hate to think of you here, where the sun doesn't shine," he said slowly. "I had a stupid idea once in my head that we should do that—you and I—just get married quietly, and slip away, and wander about in search of the sunshine. We used to understand each other so well that I thought it would be rather good fun."

She was listening for a ring at the bell and for a well-known light footstep in the outer hall; she had an instinctive feeling she was not to hear them this afternoon. Even as she glanced at the window and saw the murky twilight outside, her thoughts flew to a little, fair-haired, blue-eyed girl, living in a quiet little house in Hampstead—the girl that Michael loved. And then she thought of this man, who was going away for an indefinite time—perhaps never to come back. She spoke slowly at last—leaning forward on her elbows on the lounge, with her chin propped in her hands.

"It sounds rather nice," she said listlessly. "I'm a bit sick of things, and a bit in need of a change."

He had the wisdom to sit still and say nothing. Presently she went on again:

"I've been tempted sometimes to take you at your word. After all—Nick—you've been very patient—haven't you? Would you be good to me—or would you throw certain ugly stories in my face, after you'd got tired of me? I wonder?"

"I think I should be good to you," answered the man, quietly. "I've forgotten the ugly stories; it's simply you I want. I've always made a fool of myself, by worrying you, and pleading with you, and all the rest of it; but I've been pretty faithful. There's no one else to come between us; it would just be the pair of us, wandering off together, and having a good time. We might get a car, and start off for a long tour. What do you say?"

She dropped her arms suddenly, and then laid her face upon them. There was a deep silence in the room for a moment or two, and then she said in a muffled voice, and with her face still hidden, "All right. I'll do it."

He got to his feet, and stood looking down at her. "You needn't be afraid about my being good to you," he said, a little awkwardly. "I am the sort of chap that gets one idea in his head, and sticks to it, and can't find room for another one. You're my one idea. When would you like to be married? We can start off the same day, of course."

"The sooner the better," she said, still keeping her face hidden.

"Splendid! In three days' time I'll have the license, and have everything ready. You've made a new man of me, Celestine. Good-bye!"

He lounged out of the room, and Celestine lay there for a long time without moving, and with her face hidden on her arms. When at last she got up and moved across the room, her face was gray and tired and old-looking, and her feet dragged as she walked.

She had hoped that Michael would come to see her; there would be something now to tell him, with a fine air of indifference. He should be punished for something indefinite he had done or had not done; he should be humiliated. And then, at the thought of him, she hid her face again, and wondered why he had stopped away; until she remembered the little, fair-haired, blue-eyed girl he was to marry.

She was perfectly certain in her own mind, just before she slept that night, that he would come next day. He had never stayed away so long before; there must be some vital reason for it. The thought that he might be ill stabbed her for a moment, but she set that thought resolutely aside. She went through another long day, listening for the ringing of the bell, and the sound of the familiar quick foot-step. It was one of those blank days when no one came near her, and when nothing happened—with the sole exception of a hurried note from Nicholson Rawle, which she read impatiently and then tossed aside.

At ten o'clock that night she stood at the window looking down into the street far below. She could see the lights of passing vehicles, and other lights that shone in tall buildings opposite; she had a curious feeling of isolation, up there all alone. It was a fine night—clear and cold; she suddenly turned away from the window, and walked across to the fire-

place and examined herself minutely in a mirror above. She found herself looking for little lines where there were none; anxiously smoothing out her skin round about the eyes and the mouth. And then she looked down at her white shoulders and her dress—hesitated a moment, and then set her thumb against the bell-push.

"My cloak, please," she said to the maid; "and go down and whistle for a taxi."

With the cloak about her shoulders, she stood there in the middle of the room, listening, until presently she heard the shrill whistle far down below. Very leisurely she gathered her skirts into her hand, and went off down the stairs, meeting the maid on the way.

"The taxi is waiting, madam," said the maid.

She gave Michael's address, and got in. More than once as she drove along, she glanced anxiously to right and to left at men walking along the pavement; she had a shrinking dread that she might catch sight of Rawle, and that he might instinctively know where she was going. When at last the cab drew up at the door she got together the necessary money before getting out, and then paid the man and hurried into the building. Once on the stairs she went more slowly, even pausing now and then to take breath.

What was in her mind she scarcely knew herself. She was going on blindly, in the hope to find the boy; what they would say to each other at their first meeting she left absolutely to chance. She was drifting on an uncharted sea, so far as Michael was concerned; if by chance he caught her hands and held her, all would be well; but it might happen that he did not see her hands at all.

Her dread had been that he might not be at home. She pressed the bell, and then stood there, waiting. She was in the very act of pressing the bell again when the door was opened, and the boy stood there, looking out at her.

It was characteristic of her and of the moment that she glided past him, and round the screen, without a word. Nor did he speak as he closed the door and went after her. She sat down, and spread out her hands to the fire; she shivered a little, and drew closer to the warmth.

"You're not a bit surprised to see me," she said at last, without looking at him.

"Not a bit," he answered, in a voice that was not quite steady. "But I'm very glad. As you see, I'm all alone."

"I prayed hard that you might be," she said.

He moved a little uneasily about the room—finally came back to her, and stood looking down at her. The utter dejection of her attitude, and the pathetic beauty of her, as she sat there looking into the fire, touched him acutely. She was something suffering and in pain; and he seemed to stand outside, even while he knew that she had instinctively come to him in her pain and her suffering, because dumbly she craved his help. That at least was his thought of her.

"I've never asked you before—not in all the time we have known each other," she said softly at last—"but to-night, while we are alone here, I want you to sing to me, please."

She looked up at him with an unsmiling face; the boy looked a little troubled. "Oh—it's such a little

thing to do for a friend," he said, and moved across to the piano.

He sang the first thing that came into his head; it was Lassen's "All Souls' Day." He played and sang softly; the woman sat before the fire, shaking and stirring, as it seemed, with the music. As the last notes died away she suddenly got to her feet, and moved across the room and cried out at him surprisingly:

"I can't do it! I can't do it! I'd rather kill myself!"

He came across to her swiftly; their hands caught and held each other. As she trembled violently he drew her back to her chair, and seated her in it, and dropped upon his knees beside her, still holding her hands.

"What is it? What is the matter?" he whispered.

She bowed her head suddenly upon their clasped hands. "I came to-night to say good-bye to you; I was never going to see you any more," she whispered. "I couldn't bear to go away without seeing you—without just touching your hand, and hearing your voice. Would to God I had died when I was young!"

He had his arm about her now, holding her close, and striving to soothe her sobbing. He whispered absurd and impossible things to her—that he loved her, and that she was more to him than anyone else—that he wanted to help her, and that he would stand between her and all the world. Presently, when she was quieter, she began to tell him what had happened, and what was yet to happen to her.

"I was lonely and I was afraid," she excused herself. "I didn't know what I was doing—and I hadn't seen you for days and days. And then, when I had

pledged myself, it seemed to me that I would creep back here to you, and see you for the last time, and perhaps hear you sing to me; and then go out into the shadows that are to be about me all my life. And now I know, Michael, that I can't do it."

"You shan't do it!" he exclaimed suddenly.

"Don't let me do it—for pity's sake!" she whispered, with her lips against his cheek. "Dear—I couldn't bear it. But what is to become of me? What am I to do?"

One impulse was in the boy's mind, and one only—to save her. He had a sudden vision of the man Nicholson Rawle—that cold-blooded thing that looked at one out of half-closed eyes; and he saw this fair and dainty woman fleeing from him. It was marvelous to him that she should have come to throw herself upon the mercy of Michael Doran; he knew for the first time that it had been inevitable from the first that he should love her, and that she should love him. Had she not told him more about herself than she had told anyone else; had she not, on one wonderful afternoon, laid bare her soul to him, and pleaded for his friendship? And now, in a sense, she was putting that friendship to the test, and was pleading for something more.

"When are you to marry this man?" he asked.

"The day after to-morrow," she said. "He has got a special license—and we go abroad immediately afterwards. I have cancelled everything—engagements of every sort; that part of my life is finished. I've always done everything on impulse; and this was an impulse, too."

She was calmer now; she spoke in a hopeless tone

of finality. Michael, seeing her profile in the fire-light, and seeing the quivering of her lips, and feeling the touch of her hand upon his, was thrilled as he had never been thrilled before. With a stifled exclamation he suddenly drew her toward him and put his lips to hers; he felt her tears upon his cheek.

"You shan't do it!" he cried. "I won't let you do it. I should hate myself for ever after if I thought of you—and of that man—I love you with all my heart and soul; I think I have loved you from the first. Give up all this—and go away with me."

"Oh—no—no," she whispered feebly. "I didn't mean—"

"But I mean it—and I'll have it so," he exclaimed masterfully. "The day after to-morrow, you said? We'll go to-morrow—you and I, and we'll be married in Paris; you can snap your fingers at him then."

"To-morrow?" she whispered blankly.

"Yes. Listen to me. You can catch the night train from Charing Cross; I'll join you there. It goes at nine o'clock. Say you'll do it."

"I—I can't; there are so many things to think of—the little girl with the blue eyes—the little Stella—"

He winced. "I'm thinking only of you now; I can't think of anything else," he whispered insistently. "Say you'll do it—say you'll let me take care of you."

"In any case I couldn't wait till nine o'clock," she said. "I had a note from him to-day—and he said that he was coming to take me out to dinner and to the theater—just that last night, before we're married. I couldn't escape; I shouldn't be able to be at Charing Cross at nine o'clock—should I?" She spread out helpless hands, and looked at him with a smile.

"Then go before that—go in the afternoon," he urged, now completely obsessed by the idea. "Go in the afternoon, before he arrives, and meet me—now, where shall we meet? I know; the Lord Warden Hotel at Dover. You can stay there and dine. Better still—let us meet on the boat. Say you'll do it?"

She thought of that prosaic ceremony she was to go through with Nicholson Rawle—of the prosaic journey that was to follow it. And then she looked into the glowing face of the boy, and felt his arms about her; she thought of another journey, with the boy for her companion. Breathing heavily, and staring at him, she uttered the words she had uttered to the other man.

"Yes—I'll do it."

It was late when he took her downstairs, and found a cab, and put her into it. By that time their plans had been made, and were complete; she was to take an afternoon train, which would bring her to Dover at something near eight o'clock—by that means she would escape Nicholson Rawle, and leave him wondering what had become of her; until, later on, she could write to give him the news. As there was a probability that Michael would have to see an important man late that afternoon, with Vasserot, about a future contract, Michael had decided to leave by the nine o'clock express and go straight to the boat, on which she would be waiting.

He came up the stairs again, and entered his rooms. His foot struck against something that lay on the floor; he stooped and picked it up. It was a letter that had been thrust under the door a long time before by the housekeeper, and had lain there unobserved;

there were marks upon it which showed him he must have trodden upon it in going in and out.

He tore it open and read it; it was from Stella. It was the first love-letter she had ever written; it was a little, jumbled thing, of endearing words and protests at his absence—little gentle phrases, all running into one another, in just the same fashion he remembered to have heard her talk. He read it through twice; then he walked across to the dying fire and dropped the letter among the flames.

The ashes of it went floating away up the chimney.

CHAPTER XV

"IT WOULD NEVER DO!"

MR. NICHOLSON RAWLE, looking out of the window while he tied his white tie, saw that a storm was brewing. A wind had been getting up for some time, and a sudden darkness had fallen that hid the racing clouds in the sky. And then a little blur of rain dashed at the window panes. After all, it did not greatly matter to Nicholson Rawle what sort of night it was; he was in a very contented frame of mind.

To-night he was going to take the one woman in all the world out to dinner and to a theater afterwards; to-morrow he was going to give that one woman his name, and to take her away into lands where the sun shone, and where people endeavored to forget disagreeable things. Oh, she was a good sort, after all, and she understood him; and they would get on very well together. Presently he would bring her back again, and perhaps his money might help her to get on in her profession, if she still cared to stick to it.

His car was waiting down below; he glanced at his watch, and saw that it was still early. "I don't see why I shouldn't go round now; a quarter of an hour won't make much difference," he said to himself. "I

can sit and wait at her place as well as I can wait here. Besides, if we are a bit early it gives one time for a smoke after dinner."

He put on his heavy coat, and went down, and got into the comfortable car. The chauffeur knew he had to wait, so that Rawle said nothing to him before climbing the stairs to Celestine's flat. He rang the bell, and waited calmly until the maid opened the door.

He scarcely felt any surprise when he noticed that the maid had no cap on; he was thinking of other things. But what surprised him was the maid's blank stare of frank amazement. He was stepping into the flat, when she barred his way.

"Is Miss Wilde ready?" he asked.

"Miss Wilde isn't here, sir," was the reply.

He looked at her for a moment as though not understanding. Then, with a sudden hurry upon him, he thrust her aside, and walked into the drawing-room. He saw that most of the furniture was covered up; he turned to the girl, who had followed him.

"Where is your mistress?"

"I couldn't tell you, sir," was her reply.

Rawle stood looking at her through his half-closed lids; the girl clasped and unclasped her hands, and tried to look unconscious, as she let her eyes wander round the room. Rawle, still watching her, walked past her and closed the door. The girl turned and looked at him sharply.

"Now, my dear," he said, in a pleasant, level voice, "my time is short—and my time is never to waste. Let me know all about it—will you?"

"All about what, sir?" she asked, with a stare.

"Where your mistress is gone—and why? You needn't be afraid to talk." He took out his watch, and looked at it. "Be quick, please."

"I don't know anything about it, sir," she answered. "Miss Wilde has gone away, and has given me instructions to lock up the flat—and to go away also. She doesn't know when she will be back."

Rawle stroked his chin and looked at her. "Rather sudden—isn't it? And you've lost a situation?"

"It will be quite easy for me to get another, sir," answered the girl, with a toss of her head.

"Of course it will—of course it will," he said soothingly. "Good servants can always secure situations. Now, I particularly want to know where I can find Miss Wilde; and of course it doesn't matter to you in the least, because Miss Wilde is nothing to you now—is she? At the same time, one doesn't like to ask a woman to betray a confidence."

"I couldn't do it, sir. I made a solemn promise that I would say nothing."

"Of course you did; that was only natural. But I put it to you that you will not be likely to see Miss Wilde again—I mean, in your capacity as her maid; and she has left you to find a new situation. You girls, who have to dress prettily, don't get much chance of saving money, I expect—do you?"

The girl was silent; with her hands clasped before her she looked steadily at the carpet.

"And a girl going into a new situation—or perhaps wanting a little holiday before she looks for a new situation—must always be glad of a little money—eh?" He pulled out his watch, and looked at it again. "Shall we say twenty pounds?"

"I wouldn't like, sir—when I made a promise—"

He slipped the watch back into his pocket. "Twenty-five, then," he said, with a half smile; he pulled out his note-case.

So, almost in whispers, she told him what she knew. Miss Wilde had gone to catch the five-twenty-five train from Charing Cross; she might be going abroad. There was no one with her; and that was all the girl knew. She folded and unfolded the notes as she gave the information.

"Have you a time-table? Quick?"

She found the time-table, and Rawle ran rapidly through the leaves. "You say that Miss Wilde was going to catch the five-twenty-five from Charing Cross?" he said slowly. "I see that there's a train at that time for Dover." He spoke almost as if to himself. "I might just catch the seven-ten—which would give me nearly an hour at the other end. Right?"

Without waiting to say another word, he hurried out of the house and spoke sharply to the chauffeur. "I've got to catch the seven-ten at Charing Cross; no time to get luggage or anything else. You may just do it, although I'm doubtful. Do all you know."

Nicholson Rawle caught his train, with a minute to spare, and settled down for a long and dreary journey of three hours. Nevertheless, he was content, because he had accomplished his purpose; and, unless the girl at Celestine's flat had wilfully deceived him, which was unlikely, at the end of that three hours he would come face to face with Celestine herself.

Meanwhile, Michael Doran had been wandering, restless and half-unhappy, about his rooms all night and for part of the next day. He could not sleep; he could not settle to anything. Once or twice he began feverishly to pack up things for his journey, and then decided that he shouldn't want those particular garments after all; and so unpacked everything again. By the time dawn began to steal in at the windows he was haggard and excited, and trembling with nervousness.

He knew that he must write to Stella. He had known that all night long, and more than once had sat down resolutely to do the brutal thing. Each time, after a word or two, he had torn up the sheet of paper and burned the scraps; he would do it presently when he was calmer.

He refused to think soberly about what he was going to do; it was not a matter for sober thought at all. He loved this woman who had come so strangely into his life, and who was willing to give herself to him so utterly and so trustingly. He must not fail her; that was a thought he held steadily before himself, like a beacon, whenever his wayward fancy turned aside to thoughts of anyone else. Now and then, creeping in, would come the remembrance of Stella, like some old sad memory, and the thought of her was difficult to banish.

He made some attempt to eat when the house-keeper brought up his breakfast, but found it impossible. He pushed aside the things on the table, and sat down at last resolutely to write his letter. And this was what the poor thing amounted to at last, after many attempts:

"MY DEAREST: When you read this letter I want you to understand that what I am doing is done for the best. There are those who will think that it is a stupid best; there are those who will laugh at me. I only pray God that you will be able to laugh, because then I shall not feel that I have hurt you so much.

"I am going away to-night to someone else who loves me, and whom I love; and I shall never come back, while I live, to Memory Corner. Believe only that I was never fit to live there at all—in the peace and the beauty of it; try to forget that you ever saw me. Try to believe, if you like, that that bad side of me has come uppermost, and has driven me far away from you.

"This is a weak and stupid letter, simply because I do not know how to write to you. I have hidden myself in your secret heart; and I have been glad to do that. But now I think that the world and life have been too strong for me—too big for me.

"I cannot write anything about the little aunts; as old Gustave would put it—'I am too near to tears.' Forgive and forget me. **MICHAEL.**

He sealed the letter, and put it ready for the post. After that he flung himself into the business of packing; he decided that he would not take anything but just one bag; and the selection of what he was to put into it took a long time. At last, however, it was ready, and there remained nothing else for him to do, except that eternal pacing up and down the room, waiting for the hours to pass.

He started out to lunch, and on the stairs met Vas-

serot coming up. Glad of anyone then to talk to, he seized upon the big man and carried him off to a restaurant. "I don't want to be alone to-day," said Michael.

"And what is the matter with the little one?" demanded Vasserot, when they were seated at the table. "Ah—it is of an excitement, because there happens to-day the greatest thing that could happen at any time; is it not so?"

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Michael, reddening suddenly and then paling.

Vasserot leaned across the table and wagged a forefinger at the boy, and grinned. "Ah—to talk as if you knew nothing of it! At five o'clock we go to our friend the agent person—and we shall sign the American contract. It is of a certainty."

"Oh—that!" answered the boy, with a shrug.

"And he talks as though it were a mere nothing—this offer colossal!" cried Vasserot. "It is a thing of wonder—and then the price! The terms! The money! You will live like a little prince—and all the millionaire American ladies will fall at your feet, and will worship—I am of an excitement, when I think of it, that rends me!"

Michael ate in silence while Vasserot talked. In truth, it seemed as though Vasserot could not contain himself; every dream he had had concerning this boy was coming true; every ambition he had ever had for himself, through this boy, was being realized. When the meal was finished he walked back to Michael's room, with a protective hand upon his shoulder, and with an amiable grin upon his ugly face for everyone he met.

A telegram had been thrust under the door; Michael ripped it open. It was a bare announcement that the meeting at the agent's office with the American impresario had been postponed until seven-thirty.

"That's a nuisance," he exclaimed petulantly. "He may keep me an hour or two."

"And what if he does keep you an hour or two?" demanded Vasserot. "He is a very great man, and it is wonderful to meet him at all, let me tell you. We shall amuse ourselves in the very little two and a half hours—while we wait. It is nothing."

"It is a very great deal!" exclaimed Michael. "I've got to go somewhere to-night; I've got to catch a train."

"Well—if you do not catch that train, catch another one—or do not go at all. It matters nothing."

"I tell you it matters everything," cried Michael. "You don't understand. However, we'll hope that we shall get over this business quickly."

The big man glanced down at Michael curiously. "And where is it that you go to by this certain train?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, it's private business," said Michael. "I may be away for a day or two; I'll write you about it."

Vasserot looked anxious. "It would be advisable," he said, "for the little master to set aside all things at the moment—to forget that any other things whatever exist. This matter about which we are to talk to-day is your very life. I, that have risked so much, say this thing!"

"Oh, that's all right," answered Michael, with a frown.

Between them they contrived to kill time until the

moment arrived when they must start for the interview. It was a vexatious delay, and Michael's watch was in and out of his pocket a hundred times. Vasserot played at the big piano, and strove to induce the boy to sing; but Michael would do nothing but walk about, and shift things in the room, and look at his watch. And at last, while there was yet much time to spare before the meeting, he insisted that Vasserot should go with him; they would walk if necessary. But he would not remain in that room any longer.

They sat in the agent's room for nearly half an hour; the agent placidly smoking, and assuring them that so busy a man as the American impresario was certain to be a little late. Vasserot smoked one of the agent's cigars, and tried to make conversation between himself and the agent and the gloomy Michael, but without much success. And at last, something near to eight o'clock, the great man strolled in, cigar in mouth, and sat down leisurely to begin the business.

The business proved to be a long and tedious one. The negotiations were conducted by Vasserot and the agent; the American sat, with his cigar in the corner of his mouth, putting in a word now and then, and suggesting what he would do and what he would not do. Michael surreptitiously drew his watch from his pocket now and then, and saw the flying minutes go.

"Our young friend seems to be in a hurry," said the American.

"Not at all," stammered Michael. "I rather wanted to catch a train—that was all."

At last the business came to an end, and it was

then twenty minutes to nine. Michael would have signed anything that was put before him then, although, as a matter of fact, the contract was clear enough. He was to open in opera in New York in the following season, at a figure which at any other moment of his life would have appeared staggering. Even Vasserot was, as he would have expressed it, "near to tears" at this consummation of all that he had striven to attain.

And after the signing and the handshakes and the congratulations one could not well rush away in a desperate hurry, even to catch trains. Michael had to stand and listen to plans that had been formulated, and were to be carried out—with himself as their center-piece—in this wonderful coming season in America. Now that the thing had been signed and sealed and settled, the American did not hesitate to be lavish in his praises of what he had bought; he was a very satisfied man indeed.

When at last they got out into the street it was five minutes to nine; and the boy suddenly and unexpectedly let forth a flood of reproaches to the astonished Vasserot. "Why the devil did you let him keep us like that?" he cried. "I can't catch the train now"—he was "near to tears" himself by this time—"and what am I to do?"

"The little master agitates himself for nothing," exclaimed Vasserot, soothingly. "There is a train—and there are yet other trains; and they shall run on other days, if necessary, for the little master who has so suddenly accomplished this great thing. There shall be special trains—with cars in which one sleeps

—and what not. Why does the little master complain, on this great night of his life?"

"Because I'm going away; because I was going to catch the nine-o'clock train to Dover to-night!" cried Michael, stamping his foot upon the pavement like an angry child. "Damn you, Gustave—you've spoilt everything!"

It ended, of course, in the big man demanding to know, in the seclusion of a taxi-cab that was rapidly bearing them back to Michael's rooms, what it all meant; and in Michael refusing to tell him. He was simply in need of a rest; he had meant to go down to Dover, and so slip across to Paris for a few days; and now he had missed the train.

Gustave Vasserot, who would cheerfully have lain down on the pavement that night for the little master's angry feet to dance upon, soothed the boy as he would have soothed a child. He should go to Dover that night; a reference to a time-table in a booking-office they passed showed him that there was still another train at a quarter to ten, which would get him to Dover at half-past midnight. The thing should be accomplished, since the mind of the little master was set upon it. And Vasserot would go with him!

The boy violently declared that he would go alone; he was quite capable of looking after himself. And in the meantime he must send a telegram. Vasserot tried hard to catch a glimpse of that telegram, but failed; he had simply one idea in his mind to-night: that the little master must not be thwarted.

The telegram was to Celestine at the Lord Warden Hotel, briefly informing her that he had missed the train, and asking her to wait for him; they would

cross in the morning. After that, feeling that he had done all that was possible, and had smoothed out things, he became quite cheerful again, and apologized profusely to Vasserot. He collected his bag at his rooms, and then he and Vasserot snatched a hasty supper at Charing Cross; and Vasserot saw him into the train, and saw the train depart.

Meanwhile that other train that carried Nicholson Rawle to Dover rattled on its slow way. Rawle, fortunately for himself, had a huge coat on over his evening dress; but even with that he shivered a little when, half-way on his journey, an icy sleet was blown against the carriage window, blotting out lights and everything else outside. It would be a devil of a night to cross the Channel, he thought; but under the circumstances that would not matter. Nothing would matter if Celestine were with him—and Celestine would be with him, he told himself grimly.

The train was ten minutes late, and he drove across to the Lord Warden Hotel with the sleet still battering at the windows of his cab. There was plenty of time yet, however, and meanwhile he was making up his mind what he must say to Celestine. He had worked the matter out with deliberation in his mind during those three long hours in the slowly-moving train, and he knew pretty well where he stood.

In the first place, starting as she had done by that train in the afternoon, she must perforce wait at Dover for a long time before crossing to Calais. The reason for that early start on her part was at once apparent to him; she must escape before Nicholson Rawle was timed to arrive at her flat.

That it was the boy with whom she was going he

was certain; there was no one else. And for some reason or other the boy would go by the nine o'clock express to Dover, and would meet Celestine there, or on the boat. Obviously, therefore, the only place to which she would go, as being nearest to the boat, would be the Lord Warden Hotel. It was the simplest matter; it was certain that he would find her there.

And he found her there. When she came to think of it afterwards, she realized how absolutely characteristic it was of the man that he should saunter into that hotel, in full evening dress and as immaculate as ever—coming, as it seemed, out of Nowhere. He had shed his heavy traveling coat, and he came toward her with a half smile; it was just his luck that she should have been crossing the hall of the place at the moment of his appearance. She stopped dead, and looked at him, with a hand up to her bosom, as if to still the beating of her heart.

“It’s a beastly night,” he said.

“What are you doing here? Where did you come from?” She was almost incoherent.

“We can’t very well talk here; let’s go somewhere else,” he said easily, as he glanced at his watch. “Have you dined?”

“Yes—a long time ago.”

“And I’m starving,” he said. “You broke a dinner appointment in town with me, and I’ve had nothing since. Will you mind if I eat; we’ve got plenty of time before the boat starts?”

“I’m not going with you on the boat,” she gasped.

“Oh—yes, I think you are,” he said. “Come along—and let us talk about it.”

She suffered herself to be led away by him; and

presently they were seated, in the most incongruous fashion, at either side of a table. Nicholson Rawle was swallowing his supper in the calmest fashion; he was talking to her easily and quietly at the same time.

"I came down here, my dear, with the most selfish and yet the most unselfish motive in the world. I came down here—by a beast of a train that stopped at every station—first, because I wasn't going to lose you at the eleventh hour; and secondly, because I wanted to save you from an act of folly. Rather stupid folly, too, Celestine, at your age."

"I'll do as I like; I love this boy—and he loves me," she breathed stormily across the table.

"You love this boy—and he thinks he loves you," he answered seriously and calmly. "And in five years' time he will, I should judge, be about twenty-six years of age—and a mighty handsome fellow at that. You, my dear Celestine, will be five-and-thirty, or perhaps a little more; and you are not of the type that keeps over-young."

"I won't listen to you," she said, making a half movement to turn away from him.

"I think you will. At six-and-twenty he will be a boy still; and, with that extraordinary beauty with which he has been cursed, and with his voice—why, don't you see that he'll have a hundred women after him, and a dozen love-affairs? And where will Celestine be—a little *passé* at five-and-thirty—where will she be then?"

"I can keep him; I can hold him; he loves me," she flashed out at him savagely.

"Don't you believe it, my dear," he went on calmly.

"In your heart of hearts you don't believe it; in your heart of hearts you're desperately afraid. You half wish you could get out of it—and get him out of it."

"I don't," she said, in a faint voice, without looking at him.

"The boat goes at five minutes past eleven," he said, looking at his watch. "We've got to get on board; and you've got to write a note for him before you go."

"I won't do it; I'll never do it," she exclaimed, in a strangled voice.

"Then I suppose it is to be the old foolish game of five years ago played over again—eh?" he asked quietly across the table. "Another poor boy sent to the devil; only this time the devil, with his tongue in his cheek, will recite the marriage service. The same thing in the long run, my dear—absolutely the same thing." He leaned nearer to her. "Can you think of that time that is coming inevitably, when he must curse the day you bound him to you, and took the sweetest and the best years of his life for your own? Can you realize now what it must be in the years to come, when he sits opposite to you at table, as I sit now, and sees you growing older day by day, while he's still as young as ever?"

"You're a brute!" she burst out; yet she shuddered.

"Can you see the time coming when he is a great man, with a great reputation; and men—and especially women—point to you with a little surprised smile—and say, 'That's his wife?' Can you do all that?"

"It won't happen," she said. "It can't happen."

He looked at his watch again. "You've got time

to write the note, and prepare for starting, and leave it here for him, and get to the boat," he said quietly. "If he comes on board after getting your note you can leave me to deal with him. But I don't think he will." He held up a hand to a waiter, and, as the man approached, said quietly, "The lady wishes to write a note and leave it here. A sheet of paper and an envelope, please. And a pen."

She bent her head over the sheet of paper when it was brought, and scribbled hastily. She stopped in the middle of the note to find a handkerchief and to dab at her eyes; then she went on again more rapidly than before. How many dreams she buried as she wrote the words no one will ever know; she did not show the note to Rawle, but put it in its envelope, and sealed it, and addressed it. Then, as she looked up at Rawle with eyes that were still wet, a page-boy, cap in hand, came in hurriedly and approached the table; he had a telegram on a salver. The waiter took it from him and approached Celestine.

"The boy's been trying to find out who this telegram is for, ma'am," he said. "It's been in the rack for ever so long. Is it your name, please?"

She took the envelope and scanned it; then nodded and tore it open. "Yes—it's for me," she said; and the man retired.

"He's lost his train," she said bitterly, as she crumpled up the flimsy paper. "Lost his train!—on this night of all others!"

"It's a good augury, my dear," said Rawle, with a little laugh, as he rose from the table. "Come along; we must try and make ourselves comfortable on

board. It's a beast of a night—and yet the best night in all my life. Come!"

Michael, too, had nearly three hours' train journey before he could possibly reach Dover. That did not matter, because he was certain that Celestine would wait. After all, to start to-morrow morning for Paris would be rather better than a cold and troublesome night journey; everything had arranged itself very well. He had time now to think of the glorious prospect before him, as embodied in that contract he had signed with so much hurry and impatience that afternoon. It would be a fine thing to go out to New York next season—and to take Celestine with him. It would be such a getting away from troubles and regrets and mistakes—if, indeed, troubles and regrets and mistakes could be associated with Celestine at all.

He came at last to Dover, to find himself let out into the wintry streets from the station, with a porter closing the station doors behind him. It was very late, because the train had been delayed; Michael was cold and hungry. He was glad to think that they had made such careful arrangements: that she was to meet him at the Lord Warden Hotel. She would have had his telegram, and she would probably be waiting up for him, late though it was; in quite a little time he would be sitting opposite to her, while he supped, and while they talked of what the future was to be.

As he had lain back in his corner of the carriage, and had seen the flying wintry landscape going past him, it seemed to Michael that he was leaving so many things behind. He had blundered badly; yet it was a long step from the garret in which he had

starved with Vasserot and Bathsheba, and from which he had been rescued, as by a miracle, by the little aunts. He did not like to think of the little aunts just then; but after all, in their quiet seclusion they did not concern very much this boy who was suddenly striding out into the world, and taking it by the throat, as it were, and making it do his bidding. They had been good to him; but they had been only a means to an end, as Vasserot had pointed out at the beginning. Vasserot was always right; Vasserot knew the world.

Michael rang up the night porter at the Lord Warden Hotel, and went in, smiling with expectancy. A lady was staying there; had she yet retired; and, if so, could he send a message to her? He gave his name a little impatiently.

The porter believed that a letter had been left for Mr. Doran; he would fetch it. He came back presently to the boy, who was striding up and down impatiently, and handed it to him. In the very act of opening it Michael put a question petulantly:

“But the lady—isn’t the lady here?”

“The lady went by the night boat to Calais, sir.”

Michael looked at the man stupidly while he tore open the note and read it. It was difficult to get that idea clearly into his mind; he looked at the man once or twice, even as he read the hurriedly-scrawled note. He was trying to understand two matters at once; the fact that she had written to him, and that he held her letter now before his eyes; and that other fact that she had gone by the night boat to Calais. The porter must be mad to have said that; there was

some mistake. He stared at the porter half-smilingly as he began to read the letter.

"DEAREST: It would never have done. I see and understand that now at the last moment; it would never have done. You are going so far, and you will do such sly, lewd things, that I should only have been a drag upon you. God knows this does not change me; it never can change me. But I have tried—and tried desperately—to snatch at the Youth that has long since gone past me, and to hold that Youth to me—just for your sake. But it wouldn't do.

"I am leaving the knot of things by what I do to-night. I am going away with Nicholas Rawle, who found me here; I told you long ago that he was my living mate. We shall be married in Paris—and so much for the poor Celestine!

"In the days to come, when you are a great and famous man, you will be glad to think that I did this; you will be grateful to me. Only sometimes remember all that we have said to each other—and be a little sorry for Yours Celestine.

"P.S.—I find it in my heart to wish that you had not lost that train."

He stood there with his last thrust at the back of his head staring at the letter. The thing seemed incredible. It seemed impossible that she could have been there in that place with Rawle; that she could have written that letter, that now she was far away in the sun in the light of noon, making straight for France. Some such mad and madcap fancying this was never the thing that had been arranged at all.

As Michael stood there, with the sleepy-looking porter staring at him, he felt that he was one who had been left derelict—a man who had cut off all his past and had no future to which to look. He swayed a little as he stood, and moved toward a seat.

“You’re quite sure—quite certain there’s no mistake?” he asked, in a dull voice. “The lady’s left this note—and she caught the boat for Calais?”

“It is absolutely certain, sir,” said the man.

“Oh, very well. Good-night!” Michael crushed the note together in his hand, and thrust it into his pocket; then, after a moment’s hesitation, he went slowly and heavily down the steps, and wandered out into the darkness.

It was but a little distance to the pier; he clung there, with the storm beating about him, and looked out to sea. Somewhere in that black waste of waters was Celestine—Celestine making for Paris with the other man. Celestine, who had been everything to him, and for whom he had left Memory Corner and all the sweet, sane things of life. As he clung to the wet iron rail he wondered what they were doing in Memory Corner to-night; he had a vision of the place—rain-swept, perhaps, but still safe and fine, and warm and cosy, with the little bedrooms in which the little aunts and Stella slept. Michael put his head down suddenly on his hands on the wet iron rail and groaned aloud.

He started to walk from the place; he went swaying and staggering along the glistening pavements, bracing himself against the howling wind, and against the storm of rain and sleet that drove at him. And every now and then looked out to sea, and thought of

the woman making steadily for Calais, and leaving him desolate.

How far he walked he never knew. He came to some consciousness of where he was and what he was doing when at last, wet through, and shaking from head to foot with cold, he looked round instinctively for shelter. There was a small inn in a back street close to him; he went and leaned against the door, and beat upon it in a sort of petulant rage; until a man, with hasty clothes huddled upon him, came down to let him in.

And the man told him that he could have a bed for the night; the man also advised him to take some brandy, if only to stop the hideous chattering of his teeth. Michael looked at the man stupidly, and nodded, and essayed to speak; and then suddenly broke down, and covered his face with his hands, and sobbed aloud.

The man was a kindly fellow; he forced the brandy upon the exhausted boy, and presently got him up into a room and helped him to undress; and so got him to bed.

“You’ll be all right now, sir,” said the man. “All you want is a good sleep.”

“You must wake me very early in the morning,” said Michael, sitting up, and looking at the man through half-closed eyes. “I’ve got to catch the boat for Paris; there’s a woman there—and I’ve got to find her—very early in the morning—”

CHAPTER XVI

MISS BETSY HEARS A VOICE

GUSTAVE VASSEROT had been, as he expressed it, with many shrugs and much lifting of his eyebrows, "of a perplexity." He had gone round, after a mere matter of days, to Michael's rooms, only to discover that nothing had been heard of Michael at all. A few letters were there that had accumulated for him; but the housekeeper could tell Vasserot no more than he knew already: that the boy had gone away, and had left no word as to his return.

At first Vasserot had felt no real anxiety concerning Michael; this was merely one of the things to be expected from a wayward youth who had suddenly and unexpectedly found himself, as it were, and knew his real value in the world. Presently Michael would come back again, and would tell Vasserot all—or would tell him nothing; it did not greatly matter.

Then a thought occurred to the good Gustave; he laid a long finger against his crooked nose and winked solemnly, and went off to find Celestine. Only, of course, to be confronted with a closed flat, and the information that Miss Celestine Wilde had gone away, leaving no address, and no suggestion as to when she would return.

"Aha!" exclaimed Gustave, standing on the stairs, and nodding many times—"the little rogue! Always

has it been in my mind that the boy—the little master—would discover himself, and would go to work on that business of the breaking of hearts. He has begun early, the little one; I have a thought that his father began even earlier. Well—well—the little Michael has an excuse; and this will do him no harm. She is of an age that a boy might fall in love with; and he will the sooner forget her. Now do I understand his exceeding hurry to catch the train that left at nine o'clock for Paris. A great rogue, indeed!"

Vasserot chuckled all the way home; he had a mind almost to tell this thing to Bathsheba. But Bathsheba was English, and was hemmed in by a huge stone wall that was called "Marriage lines"; Bathsheba would not have understood, and would have been very properly shocked. It was a great joke, nevertheless; and Vasserot chewed it over to himself often and often, with laughter.

He laughed no more when a letter came addressed to him from a place in Italy. It was a hurried scrawl, and had been sent on to him from the office of the agent. He read it with one hand thrust into his thick mane of hair, and with his eyes staring. It was from Celestine.

"MY DEAR OLD KINDLY VASSEROT: Send me a word, if you can, as to the little Michael. What does he say about me? What does he think of me? But perhaps by this time he has forgotten; youth forgets easily. Tell him, if you can, that I did it all more for his good than for my own happiness; tell him that I think of him often.

"What did he say to you that night—or the next

day—when he got back from Dover? I left him there, to face the bitter music as best he could; I cannot rest for thinking of him, and of the harm I did him. Rawle is good to me, and in a way I am fond of him; but, oh—the little singing boy! CELESTINE."

"In the name of God—what does the woman mean?" cried Vasserot, wildly. "I had pictured the imbecile with the boy; and the boy presently growing tired of her, and coming back—laughing—to his poor Gustave. And now she talks of Rawle—and asks—what of the boy? What of the boy indeed?"

He read the letter again, picking out a sentence here and there, and striving to make something of it. This woman had left the boy at Dover—and that was more than a week ago! She had gone off apparently with this other man Rawle; and she wrote heart-brokenly of the harm she had done to the boy. Vasserot, raving up and down the room like a madman, with the letter crushed up in his fingers, cursed the woman in three or four different languages.

For he knew the boy. He had watched him as a mother watches her child, and had known in his own mind what Michael would do under stress of emotion. Cast aside, as he must have been by this woman, he would be prepared to do anything, in the bitterness of his shame and degradation; Vasserot almost screamed aloud as he thought what the boy might do.

And then a thought occurred to him—just a tiny ray of hope. He set off at once, then and there, for Little Place, Hampstead. Michael might have treated them differently; they might have heard something of him.

It was evening when he reached the place, and the glow of a lamp shone through the window. Perhaps, after all, the boy had but given him a fright; he might look into his eyes in another moment. How slow they were opening the door!

He thrust his way in at once when the door was opened, and so stood, startlingly enough, in the doorway of the drawing-room, looking in upon them. Only Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy were there; they had risen to their feet as he entered, and were looking at him anxiously.

"He is not here?" exclaimed Vasserot.

"Did you expect to find him here?" demanded Miss Dorcas, a little harshly.

"I expected nothing," exclaimed the man. "I know nothing. I am of an anxiety that grips me here"—he put a hand to his throat—"so that I am choked. Left at Dover! And by a woman who is a fiend—a woman who should not have brushed his shoes! Oh, the little master—the little master! What is it that I am to do?" He sank suddenly down in a chair, and covered his face with his hands, and sobbed aloud.

When he was more calm he told them disjointedly, in reply to their eager questioning, just so much of the story as he knew. That Michael had run away with Miss Celestine Wilde; and that, in some extraordinary fashion, or for some reason he could not explain, the woman had deserted him at Dover, and had gone off with another man. Yes—Vasserot knew the other man—had heard of him often—a man who was rich, and had been after Celestine Wilde for a very long time.

"And I know the little Michael—I that have

watched over him through many years; I know him well. And I say to you, ladies, that it is possible that with this thing happening to him—he may kill himself!"

They cried out at that, with white faces of fear; it was not possible that he would do anything so terrible.

"One cannot tell," said Vasserot, hopelessly. "I had a thought that the little Michael would come back here—here, where he was once happy—that he would come back to the little canary he loved."

"He wrote to Stella, and told her that he was going away with this woman, and that Stella would never see him again," said Miss Dorcas, slowly. "It has been a terrible business for her; she has been ill with it."

He snapped his fingers. "Tush! that is nothing. I, too, have been ill with it, and shall be ill with it again. If I lose the little master, I lose all. At the moment of his going a business had been accomplished so vast—and so great for him—that I was beside myself with joy. And now perchance it is gone—lost. What are we to do?"

That was a question not to be answered. Vasserot sat there talking about the hopeless business until very late; and finally went away, no better informed than he had been when he arrived. In the weary days and weeks that followed they saw him often; coming to the place with a faint hope showing in his dark eyes, and going away again forlorn, and with bent shoulders; he seemed to grow visibly older.

And then one day a van drew up at the door, and the driver handed a note to the servant addressed

to Miss Dorcas; it was a request that she would let Vasserot have his piano. "I have need of the little piano," he wrote.

So the piano went away, and the old one that Vasserot had stigmatized as "a beast" was put back in its place. In that house where so much had happened, and where there had been such strange comings and goings, everything was exactly as it had ever been—save that strange maids had come and gone from time to time; there had never been anyone quite like Priscilla.

The long winter passed away, and there was just the beginning of a feeling of spring in the air—just enough to make one begin to look forward a little to sunshine and buds, and a summer still a long way off. There came a day when the last of that procession of maids, not one of whom had ever come near to the perfections of Priscilla, had packed her box and had gone off in a hurry.

Miss Dorcas, a little worn and tired and cross, had burst into tears. "I wish we had Priscilla again," she said. "Priscilla was trying at times—but still, she was always Priscilla."

"We must try and manage for a little time without anyone," said Miss Betsy.

Now it happened that that very evening the postman knocked sharply on the outer door and dropped a letter through the letter-box. There being no servant in the house, Miss Betsy went to fetch the letter, and brought it in; it was addressed to "Miss Teakle."

"I seem to know the writing," said Miss Betsy, as she handed it to her sister.

As with most people, they turned the letter this

way and that, and tried to decipher the postmarks, and speculate a great deal as to who the letter could be from; finally solved the difficulty by the simple process of opening it. It was a poor scrawled thing—and it was from Priscilla.

Priscilla, it appeared, had not got on well with her relatives; and had at last taken a little lodging of her own; from that lodging she wrote. With some difficulty (for she was obviously not a letter-writer) she explained that she had "felt the winter" a great deal; Priscilla was not so young as she had been. Also her savings were going; she often wished she was back again with her dear ladies. And she was theirs most respectfully.

"I wonder," exclaimed Miss Betsy, excitedly—"I wonder if she would come back?"

"She might," sighed Miss Dorcas. "I could persuade her to come back if I talked to her. Or you could, dear."

"I'll go and see her to-morrow," exclaimed Miss Betsy, with determination. "I might even bring her back with me. Yes—I'll go to-morrow."

The address given was in Lambeth; and Miss Betsy had never been in Lambeth in her life, and had not the least notion how to get to it. Miss Dorcas would have gone with her, as usual, but for the fact that the day was an uninviting one, and Miss Dorcas had a cold. Consequently Miss Betsy, in the early afternoon, set out alone to find Lambeth and Priscilla.

A genial, round-faced butcher, with whom the sisters had dealt for years, told Miss Betsy the best way to go—even wrote it down for her on one of his bills. Miss Betsy thanked him, and, with her heart

in her mouth, and half fretfully wishing that Priscilla had not chosen such a place for a lodging, set off to find her.

This chronicle does not concern Priscilla; it may merely mention the fact that the old servant was overjoyed to see Miss Betsy, though still perhaps a little resentful at having been supplanted by another. However, she gave Miss Betsy a cup of tea, and, after some pressing, agreed to come back to Little Place the next day. Miss Betsy went away with a light heart.

And promptly lost her way in a maze of small streets. Having had it always clearly impressed upon her from her childhood that if you ever asked anyone the way, unless he happened to be a policeman, you would inevitably be misdirected, Miss Betsy walked on and on, looking for a policeman, and not finding one.

In utter despair and terror, she was just about to abandon all her principles, and ask a stout man she saw standing at the edge of the pavement, when she heard a sound that caused her to stop, and start, and drop the little handbag she carried. The little handbag was instantly picked up by the stout man on the edge of the pavement, and contrary to all preconceived notions, handed back to her with a smile.

Miss Betsy had heard someone singing. Forgetful of the fact that she was utterly lost, and was in a strange neighborhood, she went forward quickly, with parted lips and anxious eyes, and peered round the corner of the street. A few men and women and some children had gathered there; in the midst of them,

with his face lifted to the leaden skies, stood a man, singing. It was Michael Doran.

Miss Betsy, even in the sudden relief of finding him, could have fallen at his feet, there in the busy street, and wept for him. He was so changed—his face so sunken and old-looking—that it seemed impossible that this was the bright boy she had seen standing on the platform of a crowded hall, and singing with joy and confidence to a spell-bound audience. Miss Betsy stood there, with the tears running down her cheeks, looking at him, and listening.

Presently, when he had finished, he took off his hat, and went round to a few of the people; most of them, as the song ended, had moved away. The little money he got he put listlessly into his pocket, replaced his hat, and walked away. Miss Betsy went after him.

She was afraid to speak to him; she scarcely knew what to do. She had only the vague idea that she must not lose sight of him; she found herself—gentle Miss Betsy—pushing quite roughly against people, in order that she might not miss that slim figure going on in front. A faint drizzle of rain began to fall, and the boy turned up the collar of his jacket, and seemed to shiver a little as he went on.

At last he came to the door of a house—a poor house in a mean street; he knocked at the door, and, after waiting for a few moments, was admitted. The door was shut, and Miss Betsy stood outside in the drizzling rain, wondering what she should do next. She had forgotten even to put up her umbrella; and she knew that her cheeks were wet—though not with the rain.

She summoned courage at last to go and knock

at the door. After some delay a slatternly woman opened it, and looked out at her in some surprise.

"Oh, if you please—there's a young gentleman living here—a poor young gentleman," stammered Miss Betsy. "I saw him come in just now. I want to see him."

The woman looked at her for a moment or two longer, then gave a harsh laugh. "You're right about 'is bein' a pore young gentleman," she said. "There's a trifle of rent owin'—an' a few other things 'sides."

"That shall all be paid at once," said Miss Betsy, in a flutter, as she took out her purse with hands that trembled. "How much is it, please?"

The woman, evidently surprised, said that she supposed that a matter of fifteen shillings would about square it; and Miss Betsy paid the money eagerly. The attitude of the woman changing instantly, she begged that Miss Betsy would go up to the second floor back.

With trembling limbs Miss Betsy went up to the second floor back; and stood for a long time outside the door there, afraid to knock. When at last she summoned up courage to do that, there was no response; perhaps her knock had been too soft. At last, greatly daring, she turned the handle and went in.

Michael was seated before an empty grate, with his elbows propped on his knees, and his face hidden in his hands. Miss Betsy closed the door softly, and went forward into the room, with her hands stretched out to him. For a moment or two she was afraid to speak; she stood there in that attitude, yearning over him—wondering what she should say.

Suddenly he must have become aware that there

was someone in the room; he stiffened himself, and then slowly turned his head. The first look he gave her was at the hem of her skirt; she saw the look travel up until it rested upon her face—

The next thing that Miss Betsy ever remembered was that she was seated in a chair in that cheerless room, and that the boy was on his knees before her, with his head buried in her lap. She thought afterwards that she kept on saying, more to herself than to him—"It's all right!" "It's all right!" over and over again; but of that she was never quite sure.

Everything was forgotten and forgiven. All the pain and misery and the weary waiting; even the fact that Miss Betsy was far away from home, in an unknown locality, and that there seemed no possible means for her ever to get back again; all that was forgotten. Here was the little Michael—the dear lost son of the little dead mother that lay sleeping in a foreign graveyard; and Miss Betsy had miraculously found him! The little lady, with her gray head erect, even while the tears were running down her face, knew that all was very well.

"I walked about Dover all one night," he told her huskily (and, oh—for the glory of a voice that was gone!) "and I got soaked to the skin. Besides that, I was half mad; I didn't know what I was doing. I remember getting to a sort of inn, where a chap was very good to me, and got me to bed—I didn't wake up in the inn; I woke up in an infirmary. I'd had pneumonia, and God knows what; I've never shaken it off; I can't get it out of me."

"Why didn't you write?" she whispered.

"Oh, my dear—how could I?" he said. "After what

I had written—how could I write again? I'd shut myself out from everybody—from all the world."

"But you could have written to your friend Mr. Vasserot," she urged.

He laughed, even in the midst of a fit of coughing that seemed to rend him. "To Vasserot!" he cried. "I could see myself writing to Vasserot—and telling him that the voice was gone, and that even if I ever sang again I should only be a third or fourth-rater. Have you ever heard Vasserot laugh at anyone that doesn't sing to please him? Well—I have; I didn't want him laughing at me. I'm done with, Aunt Betsy; I'm finished."

"No—no; that's impossible," she whispered, frightened.

He took the hand that she had stretched out across the rickety table to him, and kissed it in the old fashion; he smiled at her with something of the old smile. "It's true," he said. "They spoke about it in the infirmary; but I knew it before then. The poor little mother died of it, but they thought it wouldn't come out in me. It's consumption, little Aunt Betsy—and thank God it won't be long!"

He got up and moved away across the room; she went after him. "I'm going to take you back to the little house again, dear Michael; and there we'll make you well and strong in no time at all."

"I can't go back there," he said hastily. "I can never go back there."

"It is all forgotten and forgiven long ago," she urged. "What does it matter if the voice is not what it used to be; the voice was the worst part of you, little Michael—because it took you away from us.

It's you we want—the little Michael that used to tease us, and make fun of us—and yet love us all the time. You'll come back?"

"I—I'd like to come back—to Memory Corner," he said, without looking at her.

"Back with me—now?" she whispered eagerly.

"No—not now," he answered. "If you would let them know that I am coming—if you would tell Stella—"

"You won't run away; you really will come back," she pleaded.

"I'll come back—to-morrow. I'll come when it's dark."

Miss Betsy saw to it that a fire was lighted for him, and a meal prepared. She took him in her arms and kissed him when she went away; but then Miss Betsy had done a great many strange things on that surprising day. Then she went back to Little Place, and walked straight into the drawing-room where Miss Dorcas and Stella were seated.

"Why—what has happened?" demanded Miss Dorcas, staring at her. "Your hat's not straight, Betsy—and—"

"I want to speak to you a moment," said Miss Betsy, not even troubling to put the hat straight—"in the dining-room."

Miss Dorcas followed her into the dining-room. Miss Betsy had lighted a candle in a tall candlestick on the mantelshelf; she was putting it on the table as Miss Dorcas entered and closed the door.

"I've found him!" said Miss Betsy, in a shaking whisper.

Miss Dorcas put a hand suddenly to her breast.
"Michael?"

"Yes—by the merest chance," said Miss Betsy. "He's poor—and very ill. I was with him for a very long time; he told me everything. He's been in the infirmary—and he—oh—it's all dreadful. And I want to tell Stella. He's coming back here to-morrow."

It seemed more appropriate to tell Stella in that dimly-lighted room than to go into the drawing-room and tell her there. So Miss Betsy waited beside the candle while Miss Dorcas went into the other room and told the wondering girl that they wished to speak to her. When the three of them were together it was Miss Betsy who spoke.

"My dear," she said, "this afternoon I have sat and talked for a long time with someone"—Miss Betsy's voice broke a little—"we all loved—someone you loved in particular. Michael is coming back to us."

"Michael—coming back?" breathed the girl.

"Not quite the Michael you knew, my dear—not the boy who made you laugh—but another Michael—poor—and a little broken by the world, and a little sad and sorry—the Michael we must be very good to; he's like a wounded bird creeping home to a nest again. He wronged you, my dear, more than he wronged anyone else—save perhaps himself. Can you forgive him?"

"I have forgiven him long, long ago," the girl answered.

He came into Little Place the next evening, when the dusk had fallen, and before the lamps were all lighted. Miss Betsy had been waiting for him—hovering about in the drawing-room, and watching.

So that, while he hesitated at the door, she had opened it, and had drawn him inside, and had closed it again. When she drew him into the drawing-room—that little, faded room wherein his mother had played as a child—he was grateful that no lamps were lighted, and that there was only the firelight playing on the furniture.

Presently the door opened, while he stood there alone, and Stella came in. For a moment she hesitated, and then went straight up to him, with a little inarticulate cry. He took her hands, and laid his face upon them; and so stood for a long time without speaking.

But presently Miss Dorcas came in with Miss Betsy, and, although her voice shook a little, welcomed him as cordially as though he had been away for but a day or two, and had returned in the most natural fashion. They sat together in the firelight, talking of all manner of things—of every trivial thing, in fact, that had happened since that night when they had last seen him—that memorable night when he had come in there, and had teased them and sung to them—and then had gone away again out of their lives. They glanced at each other, under cover of the friendly semi-darkness, when he spoke; all the tragedy was told in that voice.

But he laughed with them when they told him that the Major was getting stouter, and that he had had a serious quarrel with the local authorities concerning the removal of the dust in the early morning.

He laughed, too, with a little hint of tears in the laughter, when he heard that he could have his old room again. He told them then that it seemed as

though he had never been away at all. He was soon to get strong and well in this place; he even talked of writing to old Gustave, to let the dear fellow know that he was still alive. He was so tired and so worn out that he swayed a little, even as he laughed and talked with them; he went upstairs on Miss Betsy's arm, while Miss Dorcas carried the candle in front.

Ten minutes later Miss Betsy was ringing impatiently at the door of No. 4, and demanded to speak to Jimmie. Miss Betsy, with her hair half down, and her feeble hands clasping and unclasping, and with a new note of terror in her voice. Jimmie, big and comfortable and comforting, came out, and heard what she had to say; and in less than a minute was racing off down Little Place in search of that very doctor—now grown old and gray with service—after whom Miss Betsy had once raced when little Stella had been taken ill.

Michael had been found lying on the floor of his room in a dead faint.

There was not much sleep for anyone that night. Jimmie came in and sat in the drawing-room—ready, as he said, to do anything that was needed; he was still sitting there when the dawn came stealing in at the window. And by that time the doctor had gone, after shaking a puzzled head at Jimmie, and saying something about the case.

“Gone to wreck and ruin,” said the old man. “Just slipping quietly out of life. There's nothing I can do —nor anyone else.”

On this particular day he had demanded to be brought downstairs, and into the little faded drawing-

room. He did not understand quite what they meant when they told him how long he had been ill; the thing seemed impossible. However, it was all right again now; besides, outside the last sunshine of a spring day was dying away, and it was not yet time to light the lamps. And here, in some curious fashion, was old Gustave Vasserot, sitting close beside the couch on which Michael was stretched—though Heaven only knew why he sat with his face hidden by his hands! Michael was too tired even to remember how it was that old Gustave came to be there at all, or who had sent for him.

"Soon we must begin lessons again, old Gustave," whispered the boy. "The voice will come back; soon I shall be singing again."

"It is of a certainty," murmured Gustave Vasserot, without looking up. "Very soon you will be singing again."

"I never understood how I ought to live my life—and no one ever told me," whispered Michael. "Even you, old Gustave, only thought of the voice, and never of the man—didn't you?"

There was a silence in the room for what seemed to be a long time; and then the boy spoke again. "Play to me, old Gustave—play to me," he said.

The big man raised his head, and got up slowly, and went across to the old piano—that piano he had called "a beast." He sat down, and ran his fingers lightly over the keys—and then drifted into the prelude of "Salve di Mora."

And then a miracle! From that broken figure on the old couch came the glorious words—just breathed out fully and strongly, as they once had been breathed

out in a garret, while Vasserot lay on a squalid bed and watched him. The voice seemed to fill the room; and Gustave Vasserot, with his head thrown back and breathing quickly, played as one inspired. And then suddenly the voice faltered, and broke, and died away. Vasserot dropped his head to his hands as they rested upon the keys.

Jimmie had been hovering about outside in the twilight, wondering if it would be well for him to go in and make inquiries. He glanced toward the window, and then suddenly stopped dead.

Someone had quietly drawn down the blind.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PASSING OF THE POOR GUSTAVE

“I THINK,” said Miss Dorcas, with a sigh of relief, as an empty cab went slowly away from the house, “that I am glad to be home again.”

“After all, one’s home is the best,” said Miss Betsy, looking round the little drawing-room.

Outside in the tiny hall were some boxes and parcels; Priscilla was already beginning to haul them up the stairs. The little ladies had been away from home through most of the long summer with Stella; for Stella had quite suddenly broken down, and had been urgently ordered by the gray-haired old doctor out of London. More than that, it had been good for them all to get out of that house of memories, and to leave behind the remembrance of the boy who had come into their midst, and had swept them all off their feet, and had sung to them—and had died in their midst.

But now, with the long summer over, and the remembrance behind them of pleasant days by the sea, it was good to be back again in the little house; good to see Priscilla’s smiling face, and to know that presently the Major would probably look in to see them—or Mrs. Fielding—or perhaps Jimmie.

The Major had descended upon them in the most extraordinary fashion, at their tiny seaside cottage.

He had sent a telegram to say that he was coming; and then had turned up—silk hat, frock-coat, walking-cane and all—and had spent a day with them. He had kept on saying over and over again, “Just ran down to see how Stella was getting on”; and was quite short with them when they told him how good it was of him to have taken such a journey for such a purpose. For the Major was not so young as he had been, and tottered a little on the legs that once had carried him so stoutly.

Of Jimmie they had seen nothing and heard nothing. A hurried, erratic note from Flora Fielding had told them that Jimmie had suddenly gone abroad, on some work connected with his paper; but whether as a permanency or not Mrs. Fielding did not say. Perhaps now they would know something about him; poor Stella had felt a sinking of the heart when that message about Jimmie was read out to her one sunny morning as she sat looking out at the sea.

Everyone, as you already know, sees everything that goes on in Little Place; so that it was not at all surprising that that evening, even before the little ladies had had time to unpack their boxes, the door-bell rang, and Mrs. Fielding appeared, very voluble, and very glad to see them, and very congratulatory as to their improved looks. For Flora Fielding remembered a day when Stella had been almost carried out of the house, and when it had seemed doubtful if she could ever be a bright-eyed smiling Stella again.

“I can’t tell you how good it is to see you all again,” said Flora Fielding, as she kissed the girl. “Little Place hasn’t seemed the same—and what with Jimmie away—”

"Is he still away?" asked Miss Betsy.

"Oh, dear, yes; and it seems as if he'd never come back. At first he was coming back; and then he telegraphed that he's got to go on to some other unearthly place; and that's the last I've heard of him. Jimmie was never particularly boisterous; but the house without him—well, I'm getting to talk to myself, just for the want of company!"

The door-bell rang again. The Major had been on the watch, and had seen Mrs. Fielding pop out of her own house and pop into the next one; therefore he had clapped on his hat, and caught up his cane, and walked along to join the party at No. 3. And the Major gave himself airs, because of the fact that he had been down to the seaside, and had seen Stella, and knew all about everything.

"You ought to have seen the place, Mrs. Fielding," he said now—"and you ought to have seen this rogue here bathing." He touched Stella's cheek with a forefinger, and laughed wheezily. "Like a little mermaid; and bless you, she didn't mind me. I sat down on an infernally hard beach and had to hold my hat on; but it was most enjoyable. As for the journey—that was nothing."

"Yes—just fancy the Major coming all that way, just for one day, and insisting on going back the same night," said Miss Dorcas.

"I wanted to know how the girl was getting on; I wanted to see with my own eyes," said the Major. "You can't deceive me if I see anything with my own eyes."

Presently the lamps were lighted and the curtains drawn. But there were no cards this evening; there

was such a great deal to talk about. Mrs. Fielding suddenly remembered that she had some long letters from Jimmie concerning his journeys; she would run and fetch them. Bringing them back, she sat in that quiet room, and read of the wanderer, and where he had been, and what he was doing.

"I don't know quite when I shall return," Jimmie wrote. "I've got a restlessness on me that I can't shake off; and I seem to want to get away from things --and to forget things. Some day I'll come back, little mother—but not yet."

They were all rather silent as Mrs. Fielding read those last words, and folded up the letter, and took off her spectacles. Miss Dorcas stole a glance at Stella; but the girl's eyes were lowered. Miss Betsy sighed a little, perhaps with the remembrance of old unhappy things they had all tried to forget.

Some of the leaves from the big trees opposite the house had already begun to fall; the autumn was upon them. But there was still sunlight and warmth in the air when, the next morning, Stella set out for a walk. Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy had many things to attend to after their long absence; the gray-haired old doctor had insisted that the good habits of that long summer must not be given up, and that Stella must go out every day. Therefore she went up on to the Heath, and presently sat down there on the old familiar bench and looked about her.

It was strange that she should think more of Jimmie then than of anyone else—more than of the dead boy. That madness had passed; it was like a dream—the mere shadow of something that had never really happened. Now that it was all over and

done with, and now that the magic of him was gone, she had time to think of the solid facts of life. Jimmie was one of the solid facts; Jimmie had stood for all that was fine and strong and safe through everything. The tears rose in her eyes—not for Michael—dead in his youth, and in the splendor of his matchless gift—but for Jimmie, wandering about the world somewhere—trying to forget.

Someone was coming toward her slowly, with the falling leaves blowing about him. Because of those unshed tears in her eyes she did not see the man clearly; she turned her head aside, expecting him to pass. Instead of that, he stood still before her; and, looking up with a little frightened start, and half getting to her feet, she saw, with a gasp of wonder, that it was Jimmie.

"I got back very late last night—long after midnight," said Jimmie, as he seated himself beside her. "Then this morning, when I called, I was told that you'd gone out. And so"—Jimmie smiled round at her in his simple fashion—"so I just came to look for you."

Jimmie had changed. He was much browned, and his face was leaner, with finer lines in it. He was the old, quiet Jimmie, with a habit of looking squarely at anyone to whom he spoke; the old Jimmie with the slow, kindly smile.

"I'm more glad to see you, Jimmie, than I've ever been glad to see anyone in all my life," said the girl, with a little break in her voice. "I thought last night that perhaps—perhaps you were never coming back again; and I don't think I could have borne that."

"You've borne a great deal, my dear," said Jimmie, gently. "Besides, I had to come back. In all the hard work, and in all the hard life out there, I've always seemed to think of the little house where you lived, and where I've sat with you so often, and heard you play—and sing."

"I shall never sing again, Jimmie," she whispered, with bowed head.

"Oh, yes—I think you will; I hope you will," he answered. "Life's made up of memories; but life's made up of forgetting as well. And you'll forget in time; you're too young not to do that."

They talked presently of other things—of his journeys and of what he had seen; she laughed with him over the Major's visit to the seaside, and what an incongruous figure he had been in his silk hat and frock-coat.

"And what are you going to do now, Jimmie?" she asked.

Jimmie looked straight in front of him. "I expect I shall be starting off again," he said quietly. "You see, there's nothing very much to keep me here; I only just ran back on the chance of being able to see you, and to—to shake hands. It's been quite good to do that." He looked round at her with his quiet smile.

"Jimmie"—her voice was no more than a whisper—"need you go away?"

"Isn't it best?"

"Ever so long ago, Jimmie—so long ago that it seems like a memory—I told you that I loved you. Do you remember?"

"I have never forgotten it," he answered.



"JIMMIE"--HER VOICE WAS NO MORE THAN A WHISPER--"NEED YOU GO AWAY?"
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"It seems to me, Jimmie, that all that has happened in between—all that mad business that came into our lives, and went out of them again—it seems now that it never made any difference; it was just an interlude that never touched the real lives of you and me at all."

"I don't believe it really did," he said.

"Oh, Jimmie"—she turned her eyes upon him, and leaned a little nearer to him—"if you can forget and forgive it all—if only you will let me take up my life again, just where we began? I don't think I can bear to lose you again."

"There never was anything to forgive, my dear," said Jimmie. "It's just been you, and you only, in my heart and in the very soul of me, all the time. Let us go and tell the little aunts."

Miss Betsy—ever the emotional one of the pair—burst into tears, and kissed the somewhat bewildered Jimmie when she heard the news. Perhaps, in a fashion, she had known what was coming when she sent Jimmie up to the Heath in search of Stella that morning.

Little Place, Hampstead, was growing depraved. There was actually another gathering that night, in honor of the great event; only this time it was at the Major's. The Major had sent his compliments to No. 3 and to No. 4, and would everyone come down to his place that evening; and so "everyone" went along in the soft autumn dusk, and were admitted to the house by the Major's man-servant, and shown into the Major's drawing-room. The Major, not being used to this sort of thing, had called in the aid of a

friendly pastry-cook, and had provided a cold collation that was quite a feast.

They were all very merry, when the bell rang, and a message was brought in that Miss Teakle was wanted. A little surprised, the sisters went out together, and were alarmed to see Priscilla standing in the open doorway, waiting for them.

"If you please, miss—he's come back again—and that woman is with him!" Thus Priscilla, with alarming signs of hysterics about her.

Scarcely knowing what they were to find, Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy, hand-in-hand, ran along to their own house, the door of which was standing a little open. They went into the drawing-room hurriedly, where the lamp had been lighted; and so came face to face with a ghost out of the past.

It was Gustave Vasserot—a Vasserot fallen on evil days, seemingly, and with not much linen showing; but a Vasserot as smiling as ever, and as full of gestures. In the same room, but not near to him, stood Bathsheba, in a deplorable hat and dress, looking furtively at the little ladies as they came into the room.

"Little ladies of the gentle hearts—it grieves me to come back to this place—but I cannot help myself. It is for the last time that I come back; you will see me never again!" He pointed to Bathsheba, and asked a question of Miss Dorcas. "Is it permitted that this person retires to another room? I have something that I must say to you—but delicacy demands that I say it to you alone."

"I'm sure I don't mind," said Bathsheba. "I know the 'ouse; I could wait in the dinin'-room a minute."

"Very well, Mary Ann—Mrs. Vasserot, I should say," stammered Miss Dorcas. And Bathsheba trailed out of the room, closing the door behind her.

"Is it possible that we may sit ourselves, and talk for but a little few minutes?" asked Vasserot, quickly bringing forward chairs. "So—that is better."

They sat down and looked at him; they noticed how he had aged, and how streaks of silver were in the dark unruly mane of hair. Also he was shabby—something like the Vasserot that had come to them, long, long ago, to speak of the boy with the voice of gold.

"Since the little master went to join the choir of angels—and to sing, mark you, better than any angel that is there, or that ever will be there!—I have not done well," said Vasserot, shrugging his shoulders. "You have an English saying about the putting of all eggs into one basket; and all my eggs were the little master. I was to make a great fortune for him and for myself; it was a scheme of immense magnitude—and it would have arranged itself. But there was a little of his father in him—and a little, too, of the softness of the poor dead mother; and so it was nothing after all. Just a little firework, that goes off—piff!—and is ended."

"You seem to have suffered, Mr. Vasserot," said Miss Betsy, gently.

"I have suffered very greatly," he answered. "I have come near again to starving myself; but for the woman who has been faithful to me, and who has at times secured little situations for herself, I must have starved indeed. She is a poor thing—but she has

never proved ungrateful for the great honor I did her years ago. She is a good thing—the poor Bathsheba."

"And what are you going to do now?" asked Miss Dorcas.

"I come to that instantly," he cried with alacrity. "I have said that I come to you for the last time, little ladies with the gentle hearts; and that is true. It is my wish to take myself abroad; I desire to go back to the country in which I was born. I am a very great artist, as you must long since have discovered for yourselves; and in my country a very great artist, such as I am, is always welcomed. Here, in this England of yours, I am received with a coldness that is abominable and that wounds me. I desire to go back to my country; it is not impossible for a great artist like me to make a new beginning. I risked all for the little Michael—and I lost all. It is shameful that I should come to you, dear little ladies, with this request—but I am helpless."

"How much do you think you would require?" asked Miss Dorcas.

"A little six pounds?" he cried instantly. "I have it all arranged to a perfection. A little six pounds—and I am a man that goes from here with joy in my heart, and with gentle thoughts of the little ladies that never, never failed me yet. Just a little six pounds!"

Miss Dorcas went out of the room, and came back presently with the required sum. Vasserot kissed the hand that gave it to him, and kissed the hand of Miss Betsy also; and suddenly became all smiles again. He would have gone out of the house then

and there, but that Miss Betsy reminded him of something he had forgotten.

"Shall I tell—Mrs. Vasserot?" she asked.

Vasserot smote his forehead, and burst into laughter. "Of a truth—I had forgotten!" he cried. "I would have left the little one behind, had you not spoken of her. Let us find her; let me take her away!"

Miss Dorcas opened the dining-room door, and Vasserot followed her. A single candle was burning on the table, and Bathsheba sat, with a dirty pack of cards spread out before her; she was telling her own fortune. As they went into the room, she raised her head, and looked at Vasserot, and shook the head dolefully.

"It don't come out right no'ow," said Bathsheba. "There's a storm—an' there's a dark lidy; and there's sickness—"

"Put them away, little imbecile—put them away," said Vasserot, with tolerance. "Trust still to your Gustave; he will make all the fortune that it is necessary for you or for anyone else to have. Put them away—and take leave of these ladies with the gentle hearts."

Bathsheba packed up her cards in the old piece of newspaper, and slipped the package into her pocket. Then the two went out of the house together, Vasserot bowing ceremoniously to the last.

Miss Dorcas and Miss Betsy, going out after them, to return to the Major's house, saw Vasserot and the woman walking away. Vasserot went jauntily, with his hat on the side of his head; the woman trailed a

little behind, as she had ever done. They turned the corner, and were gone.

Some memory of the things that had been, and were now no more, must have stirred the hearts of the sisters as they went slowly along the pavement toward the Major's house; they touched hands softly in the darkness, and looked at each other with eyes that glistened.

THE END

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